

Expansion of Comparative Scriptural Knowledge: HWPL WARP Office and Religious Peace Academy

Imam Ibrahima Doumbia

Imam of Mosque ashaboul-kissah Odienne, Côte d'Ivoire

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, by essence and by excellence.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Salam aleikoum, which means “peace upon you”, a greeting prescribed by Islam and mentioned in the Quran chapter 33 verse 44 "Their greeting on the day they meet him will be Salam (peace)".

I am very pleased to be among you today for the 6th International Religious Leaders' Conference, organized by HWPL. First and foremost, I would like to thank you for the invitation to this event. I want to express how much I appreciate this opportunity to meet with you, religious leaders. These exchanges make it more effective to bring different religions closer together, with the aim of promoting universal peace.

Imagine you live in a country where people of different religions coexist peacefully. A land of joy and happiness. However, one day you witness a deterioration in relations between the sons and daughters of this nation, coming from different religious denominations. Faced with this situation, what would you do to find a solution? It was this situation that motivated me as a religious person to get involved in peace work.

I grew up in a mixed neighborhood in Grand-Bassam, where despite our different beliefs, the children of the neighborhood had close bonds and attended different places of worship. However, our paths drifted parted during secondary school. From 2002 to 2010, crises shook our country, creating tensions between religious beliefs. In 2010, during one such crisis, our home was saved thanks to the intervention of an older Christian brother. The imams' calls for restraint also helped prevent a civil war.

I then realized how important bringing people and religions closer together can play a crucial role in defusing conflicts and saving lives. Moreover, I understood the significant influence religion can have on its followers.

What better way to foster this closeness than through the knowledge of each other's sacred scriptures?

It is essential to engage in this process to establish close, solid relationships among religious leaders, so that these beacons of peace can then spread among the faithful of synagogues, churches, temples, and mosques.

Interreligious dialogue promotes unity in diversity by integrating elements such as syncretism, moral relativism, and cooperation for the common good, thus contributing to social cohesion and peace. Empathy is the key to embracing differences, while reading and careful study of scriptures help grasp the message.

I chose to do my part by frequently inviting churches and other mosques to participate in my religious gatherings. In doing so, I discovered the HWPL NGO through its WARP office in Ivory Coast. I participated in the first International Religious Peace Academy. I quickly realized that its International Religious Peace Academy was indeed an effective tool for bringing religions closer together and promoting peace.

From my perspective, the ultimate courage is to "seek to understand what you do not know".

Consequently, it's vital not to adopt a hostile attitude towards what we do not know, and not to shy away from it out of fear, as it can be beneficial. Man has adversaries and peers, but man's worst enemy remains ignorance of himself, for "man is the enemy of what he does not know".

"Knowledge" is the opposite of ignorance. It helps people to better understand and recognize different aspects of society and nature. It enables us to find solutions to the problems that affect us. Knowledge frees people from ignorance and distrust, connecting them more closely to society and the whole world.

In the same way, getting to know your neighbor and discovering another religion through its sacred texts helps to break down the wall of distrust. This process immediately brings people closer together, fosters the emergence of love among individuals and leads to lasting peace. First we get used to it, then trust comes, followed by love, brotherhood, and lasting peace.

I have proof of this in my encounter with ISKCON religion. I discovered the ISKCON movement, also known as Haré Krishna, with apprehension and wariness. However, thanks to HWPL's efforts through its WARP Office to achieve peace, I listened to an ISKCON religious dignitary at the 72nd Ivory Coast WARP Office in November 2022. His words on the Bhagavad Gita piqued my curiosity.

When I read verse 5.29 of the Bhagavad Gita, I was struck by the similarity of the notions of peace with other religions.

Thus, the barrier of mistrust was broken, dispelling feelings of fear and mistrust. In the discussions that followed at the WARP Office, I saw before me, a brother and a friend. And WARP Office after WARP Office, I realized that love is the foundation of all religion, as the Bible testifies in Matthew 22:39.

From this understanding, an unbreakable and scripture-based fraternal friendship arose with other religious dignitaries from various faiths.

The space provided by the WARP offices has gone beyond the monthly exchanges. Our moments of dialogue have even become weekly with my brother, a pastor from the WARP offices. We discussed the similarities and differences between our scriptures. He learned more about the Quran, and I clarified my misunderstandings about the Bible through his explanations.

This space has inspired me to invite him to share a message in my place of worship, as well as to invite my brothers and sisters during important moments in my community.

In short, yes to interfaith friendship! Friendship proves to be the best means of dialogue. Thanks to HWPL's WARP Office, my friends (pastors, priests) and I call each other frequently to exchange views on the similarities between our various religious books and practices. Isn't it wonderful?

Finally, let us remember that in September 1893, in Chicago, the first Parliament of Religions took place 130 years ago. However, from the beginning of the 2nd millennium to the present day, peace is not as apparent as we might have hoped.

The founder and Chairman, Mr. Man-Hee Lee established the NGO, Heavenly Culture World Peace Restoration of Light (HWPL) in 2013 to strengthen world peace, following his experiences of war. Through the WARP Office, HWPL has proposed an international platform (the Religious Peace Academy) to strengthen the comparison of scriptures, with the aim of promoting learning and mutual understanding of scriptures. With the opportunity for each religious person to deepen his or her knowledge of another's religion.

I had the opportunity to participate in this event in July 2023. During the presentation by the instructor of Christian theology, Mr. Lee Jeong-woo, who is the Tribe Leader of Peter Tribe of Shincheonji, Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony, I realized how many remarkable similarities there were between religions, as highlighted through their sacred texts. Among them, the instructor spoke of the "signs of the end of

time" (Matthew 24:19), which perfectly reflect Sura 22 of the Quran (verses 1 and 2), which refers to pregnant and nursing women in the days of the end of the world. During the Bible study sessions last August, I also noticed analogies in the parables of the sacred texts, and realized their significance. For example, faith is compared to a seed in the Quran (Sura 48:29), which is similar to Matthew 13:31-32.

All this to tell you that although people's beliefs differ, a safe, free, and fair life is a fundamental human right. However, this cannot be achieved without collaboration between people of different faiths, particularly the religious leaders who run places of worship. Therefore, I wish to call upon you, dear religious leaders, to go beyond the challenges and limitations that stand in the way of peace. Rather than looking at the obstacles, we could consider the Religious Peace Academy proposed by HWPL as a precious blessing. It could bring the light of peaceful coexistence among people and help us progress further in this project of peace entrusted to us by the Lord, [or by our scriptures], beyond what we could have imagined.

And finally, I would like to share with you this message from Imam Ali to Malekh Ahtar. "Develop in your heart the feeling of love for your people, and make it a source of goodness and blessing for them. Do not be a wild beast who only thinks of making them his prey; remember that the citizens of the world are of two categories: they are either your brothers in religion, or your counterparts in humanity, both subject to mistakes and errors committed consciously or unconsciously. Offer them your forgiveness and mercy, as you wish God to do for you."