From BATTLEGROUNDS to COMMON GROUNDS

Resolving the Conflicts Before the End

Abstracts and Introductory Remarks
44th World Religions Conference

Sunday, November 22, 2026

Lazaridis Hall Auditorium
Wilfrid Laurier University
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

Organized by
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Acknowledgements

The World Religions Conference extends its sincere appreciation to the speakers representing diverse faiths and philosophical traditions for sharing their insights on “From Battlegrounds to Common Grounds – Resolving the Conflicts Before the End.” Their contributions invite us to consider how understanding, compassion and justice can help transform conflict into peaceful coexistence.

We gratefully acknowledge Wilfrid Laurier University and Martin Luther University College for hosting the conference at Lazaridis Hall Auditorium. We also thank the Waterloo Regional Police Service for its support, and all the partner organizations, faith communities, educational institutions, community groups, sponsors and media organizations that help make this gathering possible.

Our appreciation goes to Tim Louis, MP, for serving as conference moderator, and to all speakers, dignitaries and guests for contributing to this shared space of respectful dialogue.

We recognize the dedication of the WRC Organizing Committee and the many volunteers whose work in planning, outreach, hospitality and event delivery sustains the conference. Above all, we thank everyone who joins us in the spirit of learning from one another and building lasting relationships across our differences.

Nabeel Ahmad Rana
WRC Event Coordinator

Dr. Ahmad Imran
Chair, WRC Organizing Committee

About this edition

This booklet brings together the National President’s introductory remarks, a message from the Prime Minister of Canada, and abstracts from all eight participating religious and philosophical traditions. The contributions are presented in the order of the theme speeches, which was selected by a random draw at the previous World Religions Conference.

Introductory Remarks

Lal Khan Malik

National President
Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at Canada

Sunday, November 22, 2026

In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful.

Honourable moderator Tim Louis, Member of Parliament, distinguished speakers, faith leaders, honored guests, friends:

Assalamu alaikum wa Rahmatullah! Peace and the mercy of God be upon you all, and welcome to the 44th World Religions Conference.

Let me begin by thanking Wilfrid Laurier University and Martin Luther University College for hosting us, and our moderator, our eight speakers, the organizing committee, our partners, and every volunteer.

And most of all, I thank you. On a Sunday in late November, you could have been anywhere. You chose to be here, with your neighbors. That choice is the reason this conference exists.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at was founded in 1889 by Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad[as], whom we believe to be the Promised Messiah. From its beginnings in the small village of Qadian, India, it has grown into a worldwide community in more than 200 countries. It is united under one spiritual leader, His Holiness Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad[aa]. This year, our community in Canada marks its sixtieth anniversary. Our motto is: Love for All, Hatred for None.

Our story of interfaith dialogue goes back to a hall in Lahore, (present day Pakistan), in December 1896.

Leaders of many faiths, Hindu, Christian, Sikh, Muslim, and others, were invited to sit on one stage and answer the same questions about God and the human soul. There was one rule: each speaker was to present the beauty of his own faith from his own scripture, and not attack anyone else's.

The Founder of our community sent a paper to that gathering. His paper is still read today. But what he championed, for the rest of his life, was the principle behind it: speak of the beauty of your own faith, honor the prophets of others, and sit at the same table.

Ladies and gentlemen, world peace is often spoken of as something that happens **far away**: in capitals, at summits, between governments.

We believe it begins **much closer**. It begins around the block. Between the mosque and the church down the street. Between the synagogue and the temple across town. When neighbors of different faiths know and trust one another, peace stops being an abstract idea.

In Canada, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama`at has been organizing this conference for 44 years. We have learnt that far more brings us closer than what divides us. We do not have to abandon our differences to discover what unites us.

But there is a problem. Unity rarely makes the headlines. **Conflict does.** A single act of hatred travels around the world in an hour; a thousand acts of friendship between neighbors go unseen.

Look at the emblem on your program. One tree. Many faiths on its branches. **Branches of one tree do not go to war with one another**.

Too often, battlegrounds are created between people who have never truly known one another. Common ground is created when people sit down together.

So before you leave today, meet one person of another faith, or of no faith. Learn his/her name. Then invite him/her to your church, to your mosque, to your gurdwara, to your temple, to your synagogue, or simply for a cup of coffee at Tim Horton's. That is where common ground begins: **not at a summit, but at a table**.

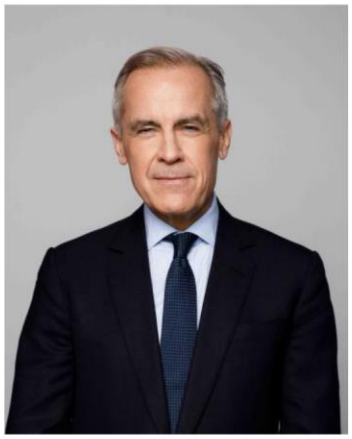
But a table can only stand if it rests on a firm foundation. And that foundation is justice. His Holiness, Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad[aa], has repeatedly reminded the world that there can be no lasting peace without absolute justice. He points to the following verse of the Holy Qur'an:

"Let not the enmity of a people, incite you, to act otherwise than with justice. **Be always just**; that is nearer to righteousness." (Holy Qur'an, 5:9)

Justice even towards those, we disagree with. Justice even towards those, who have wronged us. That is how battlegrounds **become common grounds**.

Thank you.

PRIME MINISTER · PREMIER MINISTRE



I would like to convey my warmest greetings to everyone attending the 44th World Religions Conference.

This event brings together participants from different faiths to share their perspectives and to discuss matters related to peace, reconciliation and forgiveness. I am certain that everyone in attendance will benefit from this opportunity to learn from one another.

I would like to thank the organizers of the World Religions Conference for their dedication to interfaith understanding, communication and growth.

I wish you all a productive conference.

The Right Honourable Mark Carney, P.C., O.C., M.P.
Prime Minister of Canada

Ottawa
2026

Judaic Perspective

Rabbi David Mivasair

Hamilton

Rabbi David Mivasair, a 1991 graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia, served for over 25 years as the spiritual leader of synagogues in Pennsylvania, British Columbia and Ontario. He lived for four years in Jerusalem and is an active member of Independent Jewish Voices Canada and Jewish Voice for Peace in the USA.

Speech Abstract

Jewish teachings:
God created all people equally and

We are commanded to seek peace and justice.

According to the Torah, God created all of humanity from only one couple. Consequently, we are all descendants of that one couple. We are all related, all one family. In ancient rabbinic teaching, our sages asked the question why God created the world with only one couple instead of with millions and millions of people.

The answer they gave is because God wanted no one to ever be able to say, "I am better than you because my ancestors are better than yours." We are all from the same source. We are meant to live here in God's world in peace with each other.

All the Jewish religion specifies behaviors -- what we actually do in this world is more important than what we believe. Judaism teaches that God gave us 613 commandments. Most people have heard of the Ten Commandments, but our religion has 613 commandments -- and many of them have many components or sub-commandments. However, our ancient rabbis noted that in the Torah there are only two which use the Hebrew word רדף -- rdof -- which means "pursue", "chase after". In other words, we must do all the commandments when the opportunity arises, when we are in the applicable situation. That is when we must do them. But, there are two which we must chase after. We must get up out of our place of comfort and pursue them. Those two are: "Seek peace and pursue it" (Psalm 34:14) and "Justice, justice shall you pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20).

Hindu Perspective

Dr. Raj Balkaran

Toronto

Dr. Raj Balkaran is Senior Manager of McMaster University's Spiritual Care and Learning Centre. A Sanskritist holding a PhD from the University of Calgary and an avid spiritual practitioner, he has written and edited six books, tutors for the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, and hosts the New Books in Indian Religions podcast. His work with the International Committee of the Red Cross examines Hindu ethics of war.

Speech Abstract

The Field of Kuru

From Battleground to Common Ground
Insights from Ancient India

The Bhagavad Gītā, Hinduism's best-loved scripture, opens on a battlefield. Two armies of cousins face each other on the plain of Kurukṣetra, "the field of Kuru." Yet the very first verse gives the place a second name: *dharmakṣetre kurukṣetre*, "on the field of dharma, on the field of Kuru" (Bhagavad Gītā 1.1). Dharma is the order that holds life together: duty, justice, right relationship. From its opening line, the Gītā tells us that a battleground can also be a field of righteousness. This talk asks how that happens, and what an ancient Indian conversation on the eve of war can offer people of every faith who long to resolve conflict "before the end."

That phrase resonates in Hindu tradition too. The war at Kurukṣetra is remembered as standing at the threshold of an age: the turning of the Dvāpara Yuga into the Kali Yuga, our present age of strife. The story is, quite literally, about a conflict at the end of an era, and about how to act rightly when the world seems to be coming apart.

Before the Battle: Exhausting the Paths of Peace

The Mahābhārata, the vast epic in which the Gītā is set, does not rush to war. An entire book, the *Udyogaparvan* ("Book of Effort"), is devoted to attempts to prevent it. Envoys go back and forth. The wronged Pāṇḍava brothers, who have lost their kingdom through a rigged game of dice and endured thirteen years of exile, scale their demands down to a mere five villages. Kṛṣṇa himself, revered as God in human form, travels to the enemy court as an ambassador of peace. Only when every avenue has been refused does war come.

And when it comes, it comes with rules. Before the fighting begins, both sides agree to codes of conduct: warriors should fight only their equals; those who retreat, are frightened, or lay down their weapons must not be struck; charioteers, attendants, and those who carry supplies are not to be targeted (Mahābhārata, *Bhīṣmaparvan* 1). In research with the International Committee of the Red Cross, Walter Dorn and I have shown how closely such principles parallel today's international humanitarian law, the laws of war that protect civilians, prisoners, and the wounded. Ancient India already knew that even in war, our shared humanity sets limits.

The epic is also honest. As the war grinds on, these rules are broken, one by one, on both sides, and the victory that follows is steeped in grief. The Mahābhārata is no celebration of war. It is a warning of what war costs, even when it is "just."

The Battleground Within: The Duty to Act

On the morning of battle, the warrior Arjuna looks across the field and sees teachers, cousins, and friends. He drops his bow. "I will not fight," he says. What follows, the dialogue between Arjuna and his charioteer Kṛṣṇa, is the Bhagavad Gītā.

Kṛṣṇa does not let Arjuna walk away. Arjuna is a *kṣatriya*, a member of the warrior class whose calling is to defend what is right (2.31). To abandon that calling in a moment of despair would not be holiness; it would be a

failure to protect those who depend on him. "Better one's own duty, though imperfect, than another's done well" (3.35). The Gītā's tradition calls this path of engagement *pravṛtti*: turning toward the world and acting within it.

But Kṛṣṇa transforms what action means. "You have a right to your action, but never to its fruits" (2.47). Act without greed, without hatred, without clinging to outcomes. The real battlefield, the tradition has long recognized, lies within: the struggle against anger, fear, and selfishness. Arjuna's crisis is everyone's crisis: how do I do what is right when it is hard, painful, and costly?

The Common Ground: The Same Self in All

Alongside the path of action runs a second current: *nivṛtti*, turning inward, letting go, discovering the deeper Self. The Gītā teaches that the same divine presence dwells in every being. The wise see with an equal eye a learned sage, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and an outcast (5.18). The truly spiritual person "sees the Self in all beings, and all beings in the Self" (6.29), and is "without hatred toward any creature" (12.13).

These two currents, engagement and transcendence, are not stages to pass through one after the other. I describe them as a dharmic double helix: two strands twisting around each other, each giving the other its shape. We act in the world without being imprisoned by it; we seek the eternal without abandoning our neighbours. This pattern is not Hinduism's alone. Every tradition represented at this conference holds both strands: a call to serve and do justice here and now, and a call to transcend the self and turn toward the Divine. Here, perhaps, lies our deepest common ground.

The Gītā itself points this way. "In whatever way people approach me, in that very way I receive them" (4.11). "Whatever form a devotee seeks to worship with faith, I make that faith unwavering" (7.21). These verses honour the sincerity of every seeker. Long before modern interfaith dialogue, they envisioned a sacred conversation in which no sincere path is turned away.

Conclusion: Two Fields, One Ground

The Gītā begins on a field of war and names it a field of dharma. That is its enduring challenge to us. Conflict is real; the Mahābhārata never pretends otherwise. But the same ground where armies gather can become the place where we recognize one another: where we exhaust every avenue of peace, bind ourselves to limits even in conflict, and see in the face across the field the same Self that lives in our own. From battleground to common ground is not a journey to some other place. It is a change in how we see the field on which we already stand.

Islamic Perspective

Imam Naveed Ahmad Mangla

Ottawa

Naveed Ahmad Mangla is a prolific speaker and Islamic research scholar with a passion for education and service. After graduating in Islamic Theology and Comparative Religions in Canada (2010), he trained as a missionary in Liberia and served in Toronto. He spent nine impactful years in Belize as National President and Chief Missionary. Today, he serves as Imam of Bait-un-Naseer Mosque, largest mosque in Ottawa.

Speech Abstract

We live in an era defined by profound geopolitical turbulence and widespread social instability. In nearly every corner of the globe, humanity is confronting escalating aggression, systemic conflict, and a troubling erosion of patience. Despite the devastation of the first two World Wars—which claimed an estimated 100 million lives—society appears to have failed to absorb the critical lessons of history. Humanity stands precariously on the brink of a third world war, a reality recognized by global figures such as the Pope, who observed during a visit to Türkiye that a third world war is already being fought in stages.

The catastrophic human toll of contemporary conflicts, such as those in Ukraine, Russia, Israel, Palestine, and Iran, has already claimed approximately one million lives. Beyond the tragic loss of life, these hostilities inflict immense economic devastation. Participating nations suffer billions of dollars in direct damage, with future recovery and reparations projected to cost billions more. The global economic fallout has severely heightened the cost of living worldwide, destabilizing markets and disproportionately impacting vulnerable populations.

This ongoing turmoil exposes a striking contradiction in human progress. On one hand, society commemorates past war victims and spends vast resources searching for life on other planets; on the other hand, nations continue to wage new conflicts and develop arsenals capable of complete self-annihilation. The critical question facing humanity today is clear: how many more lives must be lost, and how much financial destruction must be endured, before dialogue is chosen over destruction?

A primary catalyst for global strife is human greed—an insatiable desire for the resources of others paired with a lack of gratitude for existing blessings. As the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), explained, "If Adam's son had a valley full of gold, he would like to have two valleys, for nothing fills his mouth except dust." (Bukhari) Unchecked material ambition ensures that conquest and acquisition will never bring true resolution.

Addressing common misconceptions, Muslims and the religion of Islam are frequently scapegoated for global instability. While it is true that certain extremists claiming the Islamic faith have caused fear, division, and disorder—effectively hijacking the religion for self-serving agendas—their actions do not reflect Islamic doctrine. All acts of terrorism and extremism, whether committed by individuals or groups in Western or Muslim nations, stand in direct opposition to Islam.

Authentic Islamic teachings fundamentally guarantee peace for all humanity. Prophet Muhammad (May God be pleased with him) said "The Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hand the people are safe" (Sunan an-Nasa'i) For 137 years, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community has actively sought to revive and promote these core values. The founder of the community Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (May God be pleased with him) while admonishing the community has said, "If you want that God should be pleased with you in heaven, unite and be one like two brothers of the same mother. Nobler is he among you who forgives the sins of his brother more than others and doomed is he who is stubborn and does not forgive. He has nothing in common with me. (Kashti e Nuh: Roohani Khaza'in Vol. 19, pp. 12,13)

Islam offers a robust framework for establishing common ground among diverse populations:

Universal Divine Providence: The opening chapter of the Holy Qur'an states, "All praise belongs to Allah, Lord of all the worlds" (Holy Qur'an 1:2). By acknowledging God as the Sustainer of all creation, Islam asserts the inherent worth of all individuals, regardless of race, color, or creed.

Essential Equality of Mankind: Islam proclaims that all human beings are born equal. While personal development varies based on environment and individual effort, foundational human capacity remains universal. In his Farewell Address, Prophet Muhammad (saw) explicitly affirmed that no race is superior to another—neither white over black, nor Arab over non-Arab. True honor is determined solely by moral integrity, as stated in the Holy Qur'an: "Verily, the most honourable among you, in the sight of Allah, is he who is the most righteous among you" (49:14).

Universal Divine Guidance: Spiritual enlightenment has been made available to all nations throughout history. The Qur'an states, "and there is no people to whom a Warner has not been sent" (35:25). Consequently, Muslims are obligated to honor and respect the founders of all world religions.

To transition from global conflict to lasting unity, actionable principles must be applied:

Promote Faith Without Vilification: Believers should focus on exemplifying the positive qualities of their faith without maligning other traditions or inciting social discord.

Establish Absolute Justice: Peace and justice are fundamentally intertwined. The Qur'an commands: "O ye who believe! Be steadfast in the cause of Allah, bearing witness in equity; and let not a people's enmity incite you to act otherwise than with justice" (5:9).

Uphold Unbiased Equity: The Islamic standard of justice demands fairness even when it conflicts with personal or familial interests. Historical precedent demonstrates this high standard: when certain early Muslims unlawfully killed two adversaries who had sought sanctuary in the Sacred Mosque in Makkah, Prophet Muhammad (saw) strongly condemned the action as a grave injustice and immediately ordered blood money to be paid to the victims' families in accordance with law.

Reject Collective Guilt: Criminal acts must be attributed to individual perpetrators rather than entire religious groups. Islam explicitly sanctifies human life, declaring: "whosoever killed a person — unless it be for killing a person or for creating disorder in the land — it shall be as if he had killed all mankind; and whoso gave life to one, it shall be as if he had given life to all mankind" (5:33).

Humanity is currently sleepwalking toward catastrophic destruction. A sustainable path forward requires a return to divine principles and absolute justice. Global efforts, such as the peace letters addressed to world leaders by the head of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, His Holiness Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad (aa), emphasize the urgent need for diplomatic engagement over military escalation.

It is the collective responsibility of the present generation to secure a peaceful world for future generations. Failing to act decisively today will leave behind a world consumed by conflict, for which posterity will rightly hold the present generation accountable. Ultimately, establishing common ground does not require erasing differences; it requires learning to coexist respectfully without allowing differences to degenerate into hatred.

Indigenous Perspective

Jean Becker

Guelph

Jean concluded a 30-year career in post-secondary education in 2025 as Associate Vice President at the University of Waterloo. Her leadership and commitment to community engagement have contributed significantly to Indigenization, decolonization and reconciliation, fostering meaningful partnerships with local Indigenous communities. Jean continues to work with local and national organizations to advance positive change and support First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

Speech Abstract

An Inuit Perspective on Resolving Conflict

This address offers an Inuit perspective on conflict resolution and the conditions that allow war to take hold. Drawing on the interdependence essential to Arctic survival, it presents relationship as both a condition of survival and an ethical responsibility. It argues that conflict takes root when people stop listening, deny one another's humanity, and allow fear and injustice to erode connection. Resolving conflict therefore requires looking beyond the battlefield to neglected grievances, inherited fears, and missed opportunities for reconciliation. The address connects Inuit teachings with the responsibilities emphasized across faith traditions, while insisting that moral principles must become lived practice. Through reflections on respect, sharing, responsibility, care, humility, and reconciliation, it calls for moral courage, accountability, and a willingness to face the truth. Peace begins in everyday actions that ensure others are heard, valued, and treated with dignity.

Secular Humanist Perspective

Leslie Rosenblood

Toronto

Leslie is the Secular Chair of the Centre for Inquiry Canada and host of Podcast for Inquiry, engaging scientists, educators, authors and public figures in thoughtful conversations on philosophy, ethics, religion, science and society. A passionate advocate for secularism, evidence-based public policy and freedom of expression, Leslie is committed to fostering a rational, compassionate and just society. He holds degrees from the University of Waterloo and Queen's University.

Speech Abstract

What is Secular Humanism

Humanism consists of three core principles:

1. A Humanist looks upon the world with reason and compassion.

Humanists seek truth. We strive to understand the universe we live in, using the tools and methodologies of science. Humanists support freedom of expression, because only by challenging prevailing wisdom with open, honest, and robust dialogue can commonly held but mistaken or inaccurate perspectives be corrected. This is how progress is made.

Humanists also embrace compassion. We seek to maximize human flourishing and minimize human misery. Despite our best efforts, everyone experiences hardships. Humanists strive both to reduce harm when times are hard, and to build social institutions that prevent suffering from occurring.

2. We are responsible for our actions.

A Humanist worldview does not include the supernatural. There are no ghosts, demons, or deities. Therefore it is us, humans, through the choices that we make, who are responsible for all of humanity's acts of selflessness, generosity, altruism, cooperation, coordination, sacrifice for others, and all other noble acts. Empathy, compassion, and caring for the welfare for others is part of who we are, as humans, and what we embrace as Humanists.

It is also true that every act of barbarism, aggression, assault, rape, murder, and genocide is part of who we are, as humans.

Humanists accept we have both the power and the responsibility to choose how we interact with others.

3. If we want change for the better, it's up to us.

Humanists realize that the way things are - the shape and form of our societal institutions, how resources are distributed, and how we make decisions as a community, country, and globe - are the result of decisions that we, collectively, have made. It doesn't have to be this way. We have the option to make things better.

But what is better, and who gets to define it? That is always up for debate, and Humanists realize that the only real constraints on how we live are the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology. This gives us enormous leeway to structure our societies in ways of our choosing.

Humanists accept that nothing changes on its own. If we want to improve our lives and those of our collective descendants, it's up to us to make it happen. It is not inevitable that we will continue to cook the planet until our civilization collapses. If we want to avoid tremendous suffering, it is up to us to alter our species' current trajectory.

This is the Humanist philosophy. We acknowledge who we are, take responsibility for our actions, and work together to create the conditions for human flourishing. It is precisely because there are no second chances, no guiding hand of Fate, and no celestial safety net, that our decisions and actions matter. It is precisely because Humanists do not believe in an afterlife that we place such value on this one.

Though we are far from perfect today, we are better than we were centuries, decades, and even years ago. There is much work to be done to achieve the goals of equality and opportunity for all. Applying the principles of Humanism allows us to enjoy rich, meaningful, and fulfilling lives.

Secularism is how we move from battlegrounds to common ground.

While Humanists are happy to explain our worldview, we do not seek to convert (or deconvert) anyone. Secularists realize people will have different philosophies, priorities, and perspectives on the nature of the universe.

The compromise position of secularism - government neutrality in matters of religion - is how we can all not just live together, but to thrive together.

Our society is pluralistic, and is all the richer for it. Secularists believe Christians, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, agnostics, Buddhists, atheists, Hindus, Humanists, Indigenous, Wiccans, and individuals from all other [non-]religious groups are welcome to fully participate in public and political life. On their own time, those with religious convictions can attend the church, synagogue, temple, or mosque of their choice while serving any function in government or politics.

While secularists welcome the contributions of those from all faiths, we reject the idea of infusing religion into government. A parliament legislating according Catholic doctrine, for example, would ban the sale of condoms to men and the prescriptions for the pill for women. If orthodox Jews wrote laws to conform to their faith, the consumption of all pork and shellfish would be banned. Jehovah's Witnesses would make life-saving blood transfusions illegal. A Hindu regime would outlaw eating beef, while a government legislating according to Islamic morality would criminalize the consumption of alcohol.

Can anyone genuinely argue that life would be better with no birth control, no steak, no lobster, arbitrary restrictions on life-saving medical procedures, no wine or beer, or no bacon?

Secularists do not want to live under a Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Sikh, Buddhist, atheist, or Hindu government. No commitment to (or rejection of) any sacred scroll, nor (dis-)avowal of belief in any Deity, should be required for any public office.

Government should neither support nor suppress religious expression. Secularists support freedom OF religion, and just as strongly support freedom FROM religion. In this way, people are free to live according to their beliefs, while never being beholden to the dictates of another's faith.

When religion controls government, it is theocratic. When government controls religion, it is authoritarian. A secular state allows for the maximal freedom for all its citizens.

We know that secularism works. According to research by Phil Zuckerman, an American sociologist, secularism is correlated with higher education and income, longer life expectancy, lower crime rates, and reduced violence – in short, secular societies score better on just about every measure of human flourishing.

For all these reasons, I am a secular Humanist. If these principles appeal to you, know that you are not alone. The Society of Freethinkers (sofree.ca) is active in the Kitchener-Waterloo area. Both Humanist Canada (humanistcanada.ca) and Centre for Inquiry Canada (centreforinquiry.ca) have chapters across the country. We are happy to speak with you, welcome you, and create community with you. Be a part of the conversation.

Christian Perspective

Dr. Reina C. Neufeldt

Waterloo

Reina C. Neufeldt is an Associate Professor in Peace and Conflict Studies at Conrad Grebel University College and the University of Waterloo. With more than 25 years of experience in peace and justice initiatives, she teaches and researches peacebuilding, ethics, transformative dialogue and community-led change. Her publications include Ethics for Peacebuilders: A Practical Guide. Her current research explores histories of exclusion and responses to polarization and division.

Speech Abstract

How can Christian spiritual teachings, moral principles and lived experiences, help us to move from battlegrounds to common grounds? I respond to this question from my location as an Anabaptist-Mennonite within the Christian faith tradition who has worked in and on interfaith dialogue initiatives and environments.

At its foundation this is a question about movement. What in Christianity can help guide its adherents to transit in relationship with one's "enemy"? How does one travel from fear to generosity, from distrust to trust, from hate to love? This is a difficult question because it asks for movement in a direction that is very risky. Not only personal risks but also communal risks. If I move from battlegrounds to common grounds, will I sell-out my "side"? Am I weak? Do I do this alone?

In my comments I will explore the ways in which Christianity not only supports this movement but calls its followers to make these risky moves. I will begin with the move from hate to love, because that is central to the teachings of Jesus. Love is at the heart of these teachings with the commandments: to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbours as yourselves (e.g. Luke 10:27; Leviticus 19:18). Jesus' teachings challenge his followers to understand neighbours not only as family and friends, as one's own community and insider-group, but also those with whom one disagrees, that one despises, and considers an enemy (Luke 6, Matthew 5-7). From there, I will explore the ways in which Christian resources help support the difficult moves from fear to generosity, and from distrust to trust. In this exploration, I will draw upon lived experiences that illustrate how interfaith dialogue itself has supported movement towards common ground amidst deeply rooted conflicts.

Buddhist Perspective

Venerable Zhi Guan

Mississauga

Venerable Zhiguan, currently the Superintendent of Fo Guang Shan Temple of Toronto, is dedicated to Humanistic Buddhism, spiritual care, interfaith dialogue, and community engagement. With academic training in Buddhist studies, combined with years of monastic educational service in Asia and Canada, she has developed extensive experience in Buddhist teaching and counseling, focusing on integrating Buddhist compassion and practice into Contemporary society.

Speech Abstract

Different but Not Separate

A Buddhist Path to Coexistence and Peace

In a world increasingly marked by war, polarization, religious and cultural division and uncertainty, moving from "battlegrounds to common ground" requires more than political agreements or the temporary resolution of disputes. From a Buddhist perspective, external conflict often begins with an internal battleground within the human mind. Greed, anger, attachment to one's own position, and the tendency to divide the world into "us" and "them" can transform human differences into hostility. Lasting peace therefore requires not only changes in external circumstances, but also a transformation in how we understand ourselves, others, and our relationship with the world.

This presentation explores the conference theme through the Humanistic Buddhist teachings of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, founder of Fo Guang Shan, particularly his principle of **"Oneness and Coexistence" (Chinese 同體共生, Tongti Gongsheng)** and his teachings on respect and tolerance. Master Hsing Yun explains that oneness embodies equality and inclusion, while coexistence embodies compassion and harmony. From the Buddhist principle of dependent origination, nothing exists entirely by itself; everything exists through causes, conditions, and relationships. Animals and plants flourish through coexistence, human beings depend upon coexistence for peace, and nature depends upon coexistence for ecological balance. Life itself exists through relationship.

This principle is illustrated through a Buddhist parable of three people—a blind person, a person unable to walk, and a person unable to speak—who are trapped in a burning house. Each has limitations, and none can safely escape alone. Instead of focusing on one another's limitations, however, they discover one another's strengths. By helping and supporting one another, they are finally able to escape the fire. The burning house becomes an image of our shared world. Humanity faces war, displacement, division, distrust, and environmental crises, yet individuals, communities, nations, and religions sometimes continue to behave as though they can secure their own well-being independently of others. When we are living in the same house, the essential question is no longer, "Who is better?" but rather, **"How can we help one another?"**

This understanding leads from **difference to respect**. Human diversity itself need not be a source of conflict. Different religions, cultures, languages, histories, and convictions can coexist without being erased. Respect does not require abandoning one's beliefs, tolerance does not require all religions to become the same, and peace does not require uniformity. One can remain deeply committed to one's own spiritual path while recognizing the dignity of those who follow another. We can disagree without becoming enemies; we can be different without becoming divided.

Buddhism, however, asks us to move beyond respect toward **compassion**. Respect says, "I recognize your right to exist." Compassion says, "Your suffering matters to me." If humanity is interconnected, another person's suffering cannot be completely separate from our own. Just as the whole body responds when one part is injured, suffering caused by war, displacement, discrimination, fear, or religious and cultural hostility concerns the larger

human family. One of religion's most important contributions, therefore, is to expand the boundaries of whom we are able to care about.

The presentation further explores the relationship between **inner harmony and world peace** through the Buddhist understanding of the **Five Harmonies**: harmony within oneself, harmony within the family, mutual respect among people, harmony within society, and ultimately peace in the world. Sustainable peace cannot be separated from the transformation of the human mind. Before conflict becomes an action, it is often a thought; conversely, a compassionate thought can become a compassionate word, a compassionate word can become an action, and an action can influence another person and eventually an entire community. In this sense, **the power of the mind can change the world**.

Master Hsing Yun offers vivid images for translating this inner transformation into daily life: to become **a lamp**, offering light and warmth; **a great tree**, providing shade and shelter; **a bridge**, helping others cross toward safety and well-being; and **a drop of rain**, gently nourishing life. Peace, from this perspective, is not simply something for which we wait; **peace is something we become**.

This principle is further expressed through the Humanistic Buddhist practice of the **Three Acts of Goodness: do good deeds, speak good words, and think good thoughts**. Through our actions, speech, and thoughts, each of us can create either a small battleground or a small piece of common ground.

Finally, interfaith dialogue demonstrates that **harmony is not sameness**. Like an orchestra, harmony becomes possible not because every participant produces the same sound, but because different voices learn to listen to one another. Religious traditions need not erase their differences in order to contribute to peace.

Ultimately, the Buddhist path from battlegrounds to common ground rests upon a simple insight: **we are different, but we are not separate**. Difference calls for respect; interdependence calls for compassion; harmony begins in the human heart; and peace becomes possible when these values are transformed into action. Humanity shares the same "burning house," and each of us has something others may need. Common ground, therefore, is not simply a place waiting to be discovered. **Together, we become the common ground.**

Sikh Perspective

Rupinder Singh

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Rupinder is a student of Gurbani, the spiritual wisdom of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, the Sikh Scripture and eternal Guru. Through sacred music, contemplation and selfless service, he explores Sikh spirituality and its guidance for everyday life. In interfaith settings, Rupinder shares Sikh perspectives while seeking common ground through humility, compassion, respectful dialogue and service to humanity. His professional background includes engineering, banking and AI governance.

Speech Abstract

Across cultures, nations, and beliefs, people share deeply human aspirations: safety for their children, dignity for their families, and the freedom to live without fear. Yet these shared hopes often coexist with mistrust, prejudice, and conflict. How can spiritual teachings help communities move beyond division towards relationships grounded in respect, justice, and care? This presentation explores the contribution of Sikhi, the Sikh spiritual tradition, to that essential task.

At the heart of Sikhi is *Ik Onkar*: One Divine Reality, present throughout creation. This understanding gives human dignity a sacred foundation. A person's worth does not depend on religious affiliation, nationality, social standing, or agreement with others. Recognising the One within humanity calls for a way of relating that honours differences while affirming an underlying connection. Common ground emerges through recognising responsibilities that extend beyond the boundaries of one's own community.

The opening teaching of Sikh scripture describes the Divine as without fear and without enmity. Together, these qualities offer a profound orientation for peacebuilding. Freedom from fear nurtures the courage to speak truth and protect those facing injustice. Freedom from enmity challenges the hatred that can accompany opposition. Viewed together, they suggest that moral courage and compassion belong alongside each other: injustice must be confronted without reducing another human being to an object of contempt.

Sikhi also directs attention towards the inner conditions that sustain conflict. *Haumai*, the self-centred orientation of "I" and "mine," can narrow concern to personal interests or group loyalties. It becomes visible when one community's suffering is acknowledged while another's is dismissed, or when certainty leaves no room for listening. Remembrance of the Divine, reflection on the Guru's wisdom, and honest self-examination cultivate humility. These disciplines create space to recognise prejudice, acknowledge mistakes, and respond with greater awareness.

A compelling illustration appears in the Sikh tradition's account of Bhai Kanhaiya. During armed conflict in the time of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru, he carried water to wounded people from opposing sides. When challenged for helping those regarded as enemies, he explained that he recognised the Guru's presence in those who suffered. The Guru affirmed his service. This account brings the conference theme into sharp focus: on a battlefield divided by allegiance, compassion recognised a shared human need.

Bhai Kanhaiya's example raises a question with enduring relevance: can suffering be recognised before the sufferer is assigned to a side? This perspective can inform humanitarian assistance, responses to displacement, and everyday conversations about distant conflicts. It challenges the selective compassion through which some lives become more visible than others. Moving towards common ground requires widening the circle of concern, especially when fear or resentment makes that difficult.

Compassion, however, remains inseparable from justice. Sikh values uphold the responsibility to defend those experiencing oppression and to resist abuses of power. Reconciliation requires truth, accountability, protection, and meaningful repair. Those who have suffered must be heard, and the conditions that enabled harm must be addressed. Lasting peace depends on relationships and institutions through which dignity is respected and grievances can be resolved fairly.

Sikhi gives these commitments a practical expression through *seva*, service without expectation of reward, and *langar*, the community kitchen open to all. Preparing, serving, and sharing food turns equality into a lived experience. For interfaith communities, such practices suggest opportunities to build trust through shared service. Supporting newcomers, feeding neighbours, and caring for isolated people allow cooperation to grow through encounters in which differences remain present and everyone has something to contribute.

In conclusion keeping perspective of *sarbat da bhala*, the Sikh aspiration for the wellbeing of all. This prayer expands spiritual responsibility beyond the prosperity or security of a single group. Within an interfaith setting, it offers an invitation to connect distinct convictions with shared ethical action. The movement from battleground to common ground begins through the discipline of seeing dignity across differences, joining courage with compassion, and making another person's wellbeing a matter of personal and collective concern. Together, these commitments offer a Sikh contribution to the conference's wider exploration of how faith and philosophy can prevent conflict, support reconciliation, and help build a peace that people can experience in their daily lives.

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