

SUMMARY OF KEYNOTES

SINGAPORE, 20 JUNE 2019

The International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) featured a Special Presentation and Plenaries 1 and 2, after the Keynote Address by His Majesty King Abdullah II ibn Al Hussein of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (full speech at <https://www.iccs19.sg/assets/pdf/ICCS-PressRelease-keynote-speech.pdf>; video at <https://youtu.be/1920zfOhLrE>) on 20 June.

A summary of the sessions is as follows.

Perspectives on Cohesive Societies: Special Presentation

Associate Professor Paul Hedges spoke on behalf of Katherine Marshall, who was unable to attend the ICCS. Marshall's argument was that diversity was a feature of today's society and while we all developed notions of 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' to make sense of the world, the key was how the relations between these groups were managed to build social cohesion. Tensions around security, exclusivism, alienation, populism and legitimacy, and ignorance required addressing. To promote cohesion, we need development, inclusion and engagement of youth, engaged dialogue, and leadership. Leaders served as agents of social change, and representation of diverse communities. Religious and cultural literacy, including an appreciation of divides and grievances, was imperative for managing diversity.

Ms Karen Armstrong spoke on the religious reasons for a need for social harmony. She argued that God was not comprehensible, God was intrinsically unknowable and transcendent, but different religious traditions each had a particular insight into God. What all religions did have in common was a Golden Rule: "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire." She argued that this was not just a nice idea but an urgent global imperative. She suggested that religion was not a private affair but all contained a call for compassion, with an imperative to create just and decent societies where all people are treated with respect.

Plenary Session 1 – What We Believe (Faith)

Associate Professor Farish A. Noor opened the session with a view to considering how religion guides us in living in a diverse, complex society.

Archbishop Miguel Angel Ayuso Guixot opened by recognising Singapore as a good example of living together amidst religious and cultural diversity. The Roman Catholic Church recognised the good moral things people did around the world and sought to approach people of other traditions in a brotherly way. In his understanding, the concept of human fraternity was at the core of humanity, and awareness of human dignity of each person and their right to religious freedom was a unique expression of the image of the Creator. Interreligious dialogue was a necessary condition for peace in the world and therefore a duty for all. Migrants and victims of human trafficking required protection and support.

Dr Veena Howard observed that Hinduism is not a monolithic religion, but by nature, pluralistic. It offers peace resources for us to consider interfaith visions and harmonious society. Despite varying ideologies, the Hindu response to other traditions has generally been charitable. In Hinduism, truth is so multi-faceted that no one tradition can capture it fully. Dharma is rooted in the idea of cohesion, and the idea of karma – that what goes around comes around – recognises the impact our actions have on society. Humans are connected to each other by their shared

humanity and have a responsibility to each other. Secularism was not about having no religion, but instead defined by equal respect for all religions. The collective wisdom of religious traditions was a great asset for humanity, she said.

Dr Nazirudin Mohamed Nasir spoke on what religions can do to promote social cohesion. Strengthening interreligious dialogue, carried out in many forms such as sports or sharing traditional practices, would lead to increased understanding between various faith traditions. Our challenge today is less of encountering difference, but of living with difference. Theologies that were ambivalent of our social context could lead to ideologies of hate and fear. A theology of compassion, drawn from the compassion of God, was needed and required us to live in harmony. Religious ethics and character could mean demonstrating hospitality to others who were different from us or with whom we were unfamiliar. Interreligious competence was needed to prevent misinterpretation that could be used divisively.

Venerable Guo Huei noted that we depend on each other for survival. The starting point of any interfaith dialogue should not be that each person's belief was the only right one but a recognition of the richness of other traditions. Respect was a universal value of all religions and it was needed to ensure all were treated equally and invested in solutions. Seeking common ground is not to deny that differences exist but that we must search for this common ground to ensure peaceful coexistence and cooperation. He urged people to find common ground and then use dialogue and cooperation to mitigate potential conflicts.

Ms Karen Armstrong called for the inclusion of youth in interfaith dialogue. She said that we should invite more young people to attend conferences like the ICCS. She could remember as a young person, the frustration of not being listened to, but also the fear she felt facing an uncertain world during the Cold War. We have had difficult times before, but we need to listen and learn from the young.

Plenary Session 2 – Who We Are (Identity)

Professor Lily Kong explained that identity was about who we see ourselves to be, especially in relation to a 'like' group of people, and thus a short step towards building community. But it also can be defined in relation to some 'other' who we are not, and thus has potential for divisiveness.

Lord John Alderdice spoke on the experience in Northern Ireland where the divisions were based not on rational analysis but differences of identity due to conflictual historical relationships. Humans create identities out of their behaviour, and rapid change is perceived as threatening. However, emotions are more universal than identities – while explanations for the emotions may be different – the emotions themselves are the same. The challenge is for common fundamental experiences and the consciousness of something greater than ourselves to bring us together and a common identity.

Dr Chaiwat Satha-Anand suggested that identity becomes toxic when it is clouded by the quest for purity, but this is an unreal quest because it places religion outside its history and milieu. Identities are inherently complex. But the only way identity can be 'pure' is to avoid the realities of history, and construct narratives that are 'pure' and which remove nuances and ambiguities. To mitigate against the toxicity of identity, there is a need for societies to acquire cultural fluency in dealing with others, and foster common decency in people's actions towards one another as fellow humans inspired by faiths.

Mr Christian Picciolini recounted he felt alienated as a youth, which pushed him to delinquency, but not extremism. The push to extremism was not ideology, but from 'potholes' such as

traumas, abuse, poverty, joblessness, or even privilege that keeps one in bubbles. At the fringes are extremists who offer alternative narratives, which could include racists, the Islamic State, drug abusers, or criminals. Successfully engaging extremists was not about telling them they are wrong, but addressing the ‘potholes’ that make them susceptible to extremism. Hatred is a learned behaviour, and can also be unlearned. He said it needed to be treated in a ‘public health’ way: One had to treat the sick, but also inoculate the public from the ideology.

Dr Azza Karam said that religions are like a charter for common decency – the basis of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The UN Inter-agency Task Force on Religion was set up to overcome the UN’s overly secular stance. As religion became more prominent and political, the UN had to be more savvy about religion. There is a mass movement towards religious engagement, as if religious actors could be instruments for what has been decided in the secular sphere. She worried that religions are treated as a transactional commodity. In convening all religions together, the danger was that someone or something had to be compromised – ‘doing’ religion but losing the faith.

For reference

During the three plenary sessions and six breakout sessions, the delegates explore issues related to faith, identity and cohesion in a global context. The sessions draw on the diverse expertise of an excellent line-up of speakers in topical discussions including the role of technology and social media in religious and social discourse, and the rehabilitation and reintegration of radicalised people into society. The speakers are listed in the Annex according to their respective sessions.

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Official translations of ICCS in other languages:

Malay	Persidangan Antarabangsa mengenai Masyarakat Bersatu Padu
Mandarin	社会和谐国际大会
Tamil	ஒன்றிணைந்த சமூகங்களுக்கான அனைத்துலக மாநாடு

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Annex

Session	Speakers
<p>Perspectives on Cohesive Societies <i>Special Presentation</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Paul Hedges Associate Professor, Interreligious Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies • Ms Karen Armstrong OBE; FRSL Historian of World Religion • Dr Shashi Jayakumar Head, Centre of Excellence for National Security and Executive Coordinator, Future Issues and Technology, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies
<p>Plenary 1 What We Believe (Faith)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ms Karen Armstrong OBE; FRSL Historian of World Religion • Bishop Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot President, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue • Dr Veena Howard Associate Professor, Asian Religious Traditions and Coordinator of Peace and Conflict Studies Program, California State University, Fresno • Dr Nazirudin Mohd Nasir Deputy Mufti, Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) • Venerable Guo Huei Abbot-President, Dharma Drum Mountain • Dr Farish A. Noor (Moderator) Associate Professor, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies
<p>Plenary 2 Who We Are (Identity)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lord John Alderdice House of Lords, UK • Mr Christian Picciolini Founder, Free Radicals Project • Dr Azza Karam Senior Advisor on Culture, United Nations Population Fund and Coordinator, UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development • Professor Chaiwat Satha-Anand Professor of Political Science, Thammasat University and Founder, Thai Peace Information Centre • Professor Lily Kong (Moderator) President, Singapore Management University
<p>Plenary 3 How We Come Together (Cohesion)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professor Lai Pan Chiu Interim Dean and Professor of Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong • Dr Ali Al Nuaimi Chairman, The World Council of Muslim Communities • Dr Anna Halafoff UN Alliance of Civilizations' Global Expert in Religion and Peacebuilding • Bishop Emeritus Dr Wee Boon Hup Member, Presidential Council for Religious Harmony, Singapore

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Dicky Sofjan (<i>Moderator</i>) Core Doctoral Faculty. Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies, Universitas Gadjah Mada Graduate School
<p>Breakout Sessions Faith</p>	<p><u>Inter-religious Dialogue and Community Building</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Veena Howard Associate Professor, Asian Religious Traditions and Coordinator of Peace and Conflict Studies Program, California State University, Fresno • Dr Paul Hedges Associate Professor, Interreligious Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies <p><u>Faith and Technology</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Karine Martin Chairman, French Daoist Association • Mr Jasvir Singh Co-Chair of Faiths Forums London and Chair of City Sikhs • Ms Teo Yi-Ling Senior Fellow, Centre of Excellence for National Security, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies
<p>Breakout Sessions Identity</p>	<p><u>Social Media and Community Discourse</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Dicky Sofjan Core Doctoral Faculty. Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies, Universitas Gadjah Mada Graduate School • Dr Shashi Jayakumar Head, Centre of Excellence for National Security and Executive Coordinator, Future Issues and Technology, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies <p><u>Overcoming Hate</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Christian Picciolini Founder, Free Radicals Project • Dr Noor Huda Ismail Visiting Fellow, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies
<p>Breakout Sessions Cohesion</p>	<p><u>Building Bridges: Global Peacebuilding Efforts</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Patrice Brodeur Associate Professor, Institute of Religious Studies, University of Montreal and Senior Advisor, King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) • Dr Kumar Ramakrishna Head, Policy Studies and Head, National Security Studies Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies <p><u>Community Initiatives towards Social Cohesion</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pastor Tan Seow How Senior Pastor, Heart of God Church

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dr Mohamed bin Ali
Assistant Professor, Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies |
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