Humanizing Religion, Creating Peace

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Almost twenty years have passed since the end of the Cold War, almost ten since the start of the new century, and still the contours of a new and different way of organizing the world have yet to take shape. While the processes of globalization possess a seemingly unstoppable momentum, this can hardly be considered a global order. Rather, the effort to contain through the application of force the many highly explosive situations around the world has met with limited success at best. The situation could perhaps be characterized as one of global disorder.

Important efforts, however, are being made. Recently (January 15–16), the Alliance of Civilizations Forum was held in Madrid, Spain. Based on the belief that the maintenance of international peace and security requires the overcoming of cultural animosities, more than 75 UN member states and international organizations participated in this event. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon encouraged further action toward peace, saying, “You may have different backgrounds and perspectives, but you share a common conviction that the Alliance of Civilizations is an important way to counter extremism and heal the divisions that threaten our world.”

Likewise, in a press conference held at the start of this year, French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced a “policy of civilization” with an emphasis on humanity and solidarity. Stating that, “You cannot organize the world of the 21st century with the organization of the 20th,” he proposed that the current G8 summit meeting be expanded to include China, India, South Africa, Mexico and Brazil to create a new G13 system.
I have long urged an expansion of the current summit system to include the participation of such countries as China and India to form a “summit of responsible countries,” which will promote the wider sharing of global responsibilities. As such, I can lend my support to this proposal.

Of particular concern is the fact that one response to this disorder has been the appearance, in various locations and different guises, of a phenomenon that could be described as a slide toward fundamentalism. This is not limited to religious fundamentalism but is also evident in an excessive and unquestioning attachment to national or ethnic identity and to different political ideologies and “isms”; it certainly includes what might be termed the fundamentalism of market forces.

What is common to all of these is that abstract principles are given priority over living human beings, who end up becoming the captive servants of these principles. To borrow the metaphor of Simone Weil (1909–43), the tendency of various forms of fundamentalism to operate in this way can be likened to the workings of gravity, which pull down and degrade human beings and human society. This would seem to express a basic tendency within human beings—the readiness to turn our eyes away from ourselves, our own potentialities and responsibilities, to choose the easy way, the path of least resistance. The humanism rooted in Buddhism that the members of the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) uphold represents a ceaseless spiritual struggle to revive and restore humanity, to resist and confront the slide toward fundamentalism.

In the aftermath of World War II, the Japanese literary critic Kazuo Watanabe (1901–75), reflecting on the negative legacy of modern civilization, called for a “humanization of religion.” His assertion that “God exists to serve humanity” remains radical even today, as the current state of the world’s religions amply attests. His views represent a challenge that must be met and responded to in the new century.
In 1993, I had the opportunity to deliver an address at Harvard University, entitled “Mahayana Buddhism and Twenty-first Century Civilization.” In it, I urged that we give priority to the actual impact of religion on human beings: “Does religion make people stronger, or does it weaken them? Does it encourage what is good or what is evil in them? Are they made better and more wise—or less—by religion?” These are the questions we need to ask of all religions, including of course Buddhism, if we are to succeed in fully “humanizing” them.

The stance toward religion of the great 19th-century historian Jules Michelet (1798–1874) is an interesting example of this humanization of religion. His book, *The Bible of Humanity* (1864), reflects one of the currents of his times: heightened European interest in Asian thought and religion known as the Oriental Renaissance. In it, he explores the sacred texts and teachings of ancient India, Greece, Egypt and Persia, and comes to the striking conclusion that “Religion is comprised within the realm of spiritual activity; spiritual activity is not contained within religion.” This can be understood as an attempt to relativize the medieval view of religion in which religious principles and dogma took precedence over human beings. Michelet further declares: “We have seen the perfect accordance of Asia and Europe, the accordance of ancient times and our modern era. We have come to see that in any age people have thought, felt and loved in the same way. Thus, there is but one humanity, one heart, not two.”

His enthusiastic celebration of humankind may strike us today as all too utopian and optimistic, perhaps naïve. His hopeful tracing of the genealogy of human flowering, from ancient India and Greece, through the “dark ages” of the medieval period, and into the Renaissance and the French Revolution with its values of liberty, fraternity and equality, was deeply betrayed by later historical developments. The horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, in particular, have brought an inescapable sense of the twilight of modern civilization that makes it impossible for us today to share his optimism.

But we must not, as the expression has it, throw out the baby with the bathwater. We must
not lose sight of Michelet’s core stance, which is that humanity must be the protagonist in the creation of history in all its aspects, including the religious. The success of our struggle for humanism will hinge on our ability to share this stance, to deepen it and pass it on to future generations.

Kazuo Watanabe spoke of the “human smallness and frailty that makes it easy for us to become the instruments and slaves of our own creations.” This smallness and frailty is ultimately what unleashed the tempests of violence and war of the 20th century. It is what makes people vulnerable to the appeals of radical or fundamentalist ideologies, unaware of the horrors that await them.

The key to waging a successful spiritual struggle for the ideals of humanism lies in dialogue, a challenge that is as old (and as new) as humanity itself. In the realm of religion, with its tragic legacy of fanaticism and intolerance, nothing is more vital than dialogue that transcends dogmatism and is predicated on the exercise of reason and self-mastery. To abandon dialogue is a suicidal act for any religion. Homo sapiens is at the same time Homo loquens. However threatening the rejectionist forces of fanaticism, mistrust or dogmatism may loom, we must never allow the banner of humanism to fall.

The German physicist and philosopher Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker (1912–2007) defined human beings as those with whom we conduct dialogue in order to live together. In this way, he positioned dialogue at the very heart of what it means to be human. Dialogue is indeed the greatest proof of our humanity, the guiding essence and central practice of humanism.

If we are to engage in sustained dialogue, it is no doubt necessary that we muster and bring forth the highest virtues of human beings: our goodness, strength and wisdom. To be worthy of the name, religions must be the driving force for this effort. This is why my Harvard address focused on the role Mahayana Buddhism can play in restoring humanity within 21st-century civilization.
I personally have dedicated myself to this project, meeting with more than 7,000 thinkers and leaders in various fields, and have published almost 50 written dialogues, beginning with that which I conducted with the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee (1889–1975) (published in English as Choose Life in 1976). My interlocutors have included representatives of the Christian and Confucian spheres of civilization, as well as people hailing from Islamic and Hindu civilizations. I further conducted numerous dialogues with representatives of the former socialist bloc. In terms of disciplines, my meetings with scholars have not been limited to the humanities, but have included physicists, astronomers and other practitioners of the natural sciences.

The Buddhist scriptures teach that “immeasurable meanings derive from the one law,” and I have been motivated by the desire to create, through the steady practice of dialogue, bridges linking different religions, civilizations and disciplines, and to contribute to making an open and universal humanism the tenor of the new era.

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, for example, SGI representatives took part in dialogue with representatives of the Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths, sponsored by the European Academy of Sciences and Arts. In addition to these efforts to seek paths to peace, research institutions which I have founded, such as the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research and the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, have all been actively engaged in promoting dialogue among different religions and civilizations.

From this overall perspective, I would next like to discuss the kinds of concrete actions and policies that can be implemented to resolve the complex of global problems presently confronting humankind.

This year will mark the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The UDHR both gave voice to a vision of universal human rights and
established the goal of bringing into being a world free from fear and free from want. Together with the United Nations Charter, likewise adopted in the wake of World War II, the UDHR signaled a new departure and sought to chart the path to new modes of peaceful coexistence for humankind.

In the 21st century, in addition to the “horizontal” (spatial) axis of a universality that transcends national borders as advocated in the UDHR, I believe we also require the “vertical” (temporal) axis of a sense of responsibility that extends to future generations, especially in our efforts to construct a sustainable and peaceful global society.

Specifically I would like to offer concrete proposals in the following three areas: protecting the ecological integrity of the planet; upholding human dignity; and creating the infrastructures of peace.

**Protecting the ecological integrity of the planet**

Last year, in 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued its Fourth Assessment Report, which warned that if global warming proceeds at the current pace, it could seriously undermine the foundation for human existence on Earth. While there has been a consistent deepening of the sense of urgency regarding environmental issues, international society still lags in its efforts to come together in concerted action.

Ecological integrity is the shared interest and concern of all humankind, an issue that transcends national borders and priorities. Any solution will require a strong sense of individual responsibility and commitment by each of us as inhabitants sharing this same planet.

The founding president of the Soka Gakkai, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944), stressed that individuals should be aware of three levels of citizenship: our local roots and commitments based in our immediate community; our sense of belonging to a national
community; and an appreciation of the fact that the world is the stage on which we ultimately live our lives and that we are in this sense all citizens of the world. On this basis, he urged that people transcend an excessive or exclusive attachment to national interests and develop an active awareness of their commitment to humankind as a whole.

This was the principle underlying the SGI’s call for a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and our subsequent efforts in collaboration with relevant UN agencies and other NGOs to realize and implement the Decade.

Here, in addition to the importance of environmental education and activities to raise awareness, I would like to propose the following institutional reform, that is, that the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) be reorganized and upgraded to the status of a specialized agency, a “world environmental organization.”

The key reason I wish to propose this is that, at present, only the countries that serve on the UNEP Governing Council are able to participate directly in debates and decision-making. If UNEP is accorded the status of a specialized agency, however, all UN member states will be welcomed to the table.

Persuasion and consensus are the essence of soft power, and opening debates to wider participation in this way is critically important to strengthening global environmental governance, a subject of great concern. Further, this will lay the foundations for the UN to engage that much more effectively and energetically with the problems of the global environment.

In December 2007, the United Nations Climate Change Conference was held in Bali, Indonesia. There the Bali Roadmap, which charts the course toward the creation of a post-2012 framework, was adopted, and it was decided that this process will be conducted with the participation of the United States, India and China, major sources of greenhouse gas emissions that had not been part of the Kyoto Protocol framework.
In 1903, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi called for what he termed “humanitarian competition” among states. Today I feel that such an approach is critical. What I would first stress is the need to break away from the negative focus that tends to prioritize minimizing national obligations and burdens over the achievement of larger, global objectives. Taking a more fundamentally positive approach, the major economies should take the lead in establishing objectives and pursue these through aggressive policy measures, while at the same time actively supporting the efforts of other countries, vying with each other to make the greatest contribution to the resolution of this planetary crisis.

One response to the challenge of climate change has been the active and ambitious efforts of European states to encourage the introduction of renewable sources of energy. Parallel to such efforts, energy conservation and enhanced energy efficiency are critical in the quest for a low-carbon society. Japan has a wealth of experience and achievement in this field and should play an active role in helping East Asia develop into a global model of energy efficiency.

The Billion Trees Campaign promoted by UNEP has garnered attention and recognition as a global grassroots effort to counter climate change. With the support and participation of many citizens and NGOs, last year saw the planting of 1.9 billion trees. I hope this program will be continued and become established, and that linkages with the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development will be encouraged, particularly from the viewpoint of experiential learning.

**Protecting human dignity**

As mentioned, 2008 marks the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. To make this anniversary substantive, it is vital that we make it the occasion for renewing efforts to establish respect for human rights within people’s daily lives and awareness as the basis for the universal experience of human dignity. To this end, various
educational and other efforts should be encouraged.

I have repeatedly urged the establishment of a global framework for human rights education. Human rights issues must not only be debated actively among governments; we must establish a shared global culture of human rights that is rooted in the realities of daily life.

Here I would like to urge the early holding of an international conference on human rights education and learning at which representatives of global civil society will gather to take the initiative toward ensuring the success of the UN-sponsored World Programme for Human Rights Education, which was initiated in 2005.

I would like next to discuss the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which include such concrete objectives as reducing by half the number of people suffering from poverty and hunger by the year 2015. The year 2007 represented the halfway-point toward the target date of 2015, but there is real concern that these goals will not be attained at the present rate of progress.

In July 2007, the Declaration on the Millennium Development Goals by Heads of State was signed by the leaders of the U.S., Canada, Japan, Ghana, Brazil, India, and a number of European countries. U.K. Prime Minister Gordon Brown took the initiative in this declaration which confirms the importance of mustering the political will in both developed and developing countries to bring together “the right policies and right reforms… combined with sufficient resources.”

The UN has designated the years 2005–15 as the International Decade for Action “Water for Life” and 2008 as the International Year of Sanitation. In this context, I would like to urge the creation of a global framework to achieve the MDGs with a special stress on securing access to safe water and sanitary living conditions for the world’s people.
It is estimated that such efforts will require additional expenditures of 10 billion dollars per year. This amount, however, is the equivalent to a mere eight days of world military spending. In this connection, I would like to propose the establishment of a world fund for “water for life” as a step toward securing the necessary funds for these efforts.

In this connection, I would next like to discuss policy steps that can help ensure that the new century is truly the “Century of Africa” as I have long asserted it must be.

Recent years have seen the resolution of several civil wars and conflicts in Africa. There have been important transitions to civilian government, and many parts of the continent have seen improved rates of economic growth. The establishment of the African Union has signaled a more energetic pursuit of the long-term goal of regional integration.

Needless to say, the conflict in Darfur and the refugee situation in various regions continue to present dire challenges, and the fact remains that in many African countries progress toward the realization of the MDGs remains woefully inadequate. The world cannot remain indifferent to the challenges and hopes of the African people, who have refused to succumb under the historical burdens of the slave trade and colonialism, and who strive to forge solidarity in the effort to confront their common challenges. This is seen, for example, in the work of the people of South Africa under the leadership of President Nelson Mandela to overcome the horrific legacy of apartheid and in the empowerment of women and environmental protection realized by the Greenbelt Movement led by Dr. Wangari Maathai. It is crucial that the international community actively support the efforts of the people of Africa.

In May 2008, the fourth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD IV) will be held in Yokohama. I would like to urge that the debate focus on concrete measures to ensure that the empowerment of youth is at the heart of all policy proposals. It is critical that we take measures now to break the vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty and poor living conditions. It is crucial to improve conditions for young people as the
linchpin of the step-by-step effort to improve living conditions for people of all generations. Concretely, I would urge that a “program for African youth partnership” be established as one of the pillars of TICAD to help foster the talents of the young people who will play a critical role in meeting the challenges Africa faces.

**Building the infrastructures of peace**

During the height of Cold War tensions, to reduce these and help prevent further escalation of the arms race, I called for summit meetings between the leaders of the superpowers. At a time when, in addition to the U.S.–Soviet confrontation, tensions between China and the Soviet Union were at a critical level (1974–75), I traveled to the three countries in a private capacity, meeting, among others, with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin and U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Through such efforts, I hoped to build bridges that would lead to improved relations between the three countries.

In this I was driven by the determination that full-scale nuclear warfare, which would have catastrophic effects for the entire human race, must be prevented at all costs. With the end of the Cold War, while this specific threat has receded, we now face new and emerging dangers in the form of nuclear proliferation.

In my 2007 peace proposal, I called for a search for means of realizing security that are not reliant on nuclear weapons, and to this end urged the establishment of an international nuclear disarmament agency to ensure the good-faith fulfillment of existing legal commitments to nuclear disarmament. Equally essential to the realization of nuclear abolition is establishing consensus within the international community regarding the fundamental illegality of nuclear weapons. As one element of this effort, I would like to focus on and lend my support to the call issued by the Canadian Pugwash Group for the establishment of an Arctic Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (NWFZ).

If global warming were to cause the polar icecaps to recede or even disappear during the
summer months, this could open the way for an increased militarization of the Arctic region, which already occupies a position of strategic military and geographical importance. It could also spark an international scramble to develop seabed and other resources, bringing the interests of different countries into conflict.

Nuclear-weapon-free zones have already been established in Antarctica, Latin America and the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, Africa, the South Pacific, Central Asia and Mongolia. In total, well over 100 states have expressed, through their participation in such zones, their desire that nuclear weapons be outlawed.

The establishment of a treaty denuclearizing the Arctic region would further strengthen momentum toward making the illegality of nuclear weapons the shared norm of humanity. Eventually, this should take the form of an international treaty for the comprehensive prohibition of nuclear weapons. In this endeavor Japan, as a country that directly experienced the horrors of nuclear weapons and which upholds as core national policy the three non-nuclear principles of not possessing, developing or allowing nuclear weapons onto its national territory, should take the lead.

Similarly, in dealing with the nuclear proliferation challenges in Northeast Asia I think it is important to have a larger goal in sight. All efforts should continue through the Six-Party Talks toward the complete dismantling of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. At the same time, Japan should reaffirm its uncompromising commitment to its own non-nuclear policies, and should deploy its full diplomatic efforts toward the more encompassing goal of establishing a nuclear-weapon-free zone covering the whole of Northeast Asia.

Last year, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the declaration calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons made by second Soka Gakkai President Josei Toda (1900–58), the SGI initiated the international exhibition “From a Culture of Violence to a Culture of Peace: Transforming the Human Spirit.” Since the 1980s, the SGI has been actively engaged in similar efforts to raise public awareness of the nuclear issue, cooperating in this with the
United Nations and various civil society partners. We are determined to continue these efforts, working with the Pugwash Conferences and other organizations that share the goal of building a global grassroots consensus for the prohibition and abolition of nuclear weapons. We regard such efforts as an integral aspect of our societal mission as Buddhists to promote respect for the sanctity of life.

My other proposal toward building the infrastructures of peace is to outlaw so-called “cluster bombs.” These inhuman weapons continue to be put to actual use, killing and maiming people around the world. Last year, concrete efforts began among interested states and NGOs to draft and adopt a treaty that will ban cluster bombs. While it is of course desirable that as many states as possible become part of this new disarmament regime, priority should be placed on getting a treaty signed and in place. The success of such efforts with strong NGO support, following the example of the banning of landmines, will have a definite positive impact on momentum toward disarmament in other fields.

Lastly, I would like to address the future prospects for the East Asian region.

Thirty years have now passed since the signing of the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship. On the economic front, there has been a deepening of interdependence between China and Japan, and there are signs that the dialogue process between the top leaders is becoming regularized. In April 2007, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao made an official visit to Japan and held talks with the Japanese prime minister. This led to a joint press statement which defined bilateral policy and included the declaration that “Both countries will strengthen coordination and cooperation, and tackle regional and global challenges together.” During his visit, I had the pleasure of conferring with the Chinese Premier and was deeply impressed by his statement that closer Sino-Japanese friendship is the general trend and shared aspiration of both peoples.

In addition to the warming in Sino-Japanese relations, there has also been a steady improvement in Japan’s relations with South Korea. It is important that Japan continue to
make efforts to enhance trust and build relations with these two countries, and makes positive moves to encourage regional cooperation in East Asia. In November last year, ASEAN (the Association of South-East Asian Nations) held a summit where agreement was reached on an ASEAN Charter that upholds such objectives as the promotion of peace, security and stability in the region, the preservation of the nuclear-weapon-free status of Southeast Asia and the alleviation of poverty. At the same meeting, the ASEAN states set out a blueprint toward the creation of an ASEAN Economic Community by 2015. Such moves hold out the hopeful prospect for building the infrastructures for peace in East Asia.

Starting in 2007, the Japanese government initiated a program to invite 6,000 young people from East Asian countries to study each year in Japan. I would hope that this opportunity to deepen understanding and friendship will also be a chance for the young people of the region to learn from the environmental and disarmament education programs promoted by the UN and to develop a shared sense of awareness and responsibility for the future.

Ultimately, the key to the resolution of all issues is in the hands of young people. Second President Toda declared: “The new century will be created by the power and passion of youth.” Embracing the words and spirit he bequeathed to us, we of the SGI are determined to maintain a focus on youth and young people, fostering their limitless potential as we build grassroots solidarity toward the resolution of the complex issues facing our planet.