

Closing Remarks

Virginia Benson

THANK you, Dr. Peter Laurence, for so deftly summarizing two of the key points from today's dialogue. In that same spirit, I'd like to offer two points as well.

I would first like to say that this day has been a fitting celebration of the special space that has been created here—an open space for different religious traditions to come together in dialogue. Dr. Victor Kanzan-jian's own stance of warmth and welcome has set the tone.

I remember when the Education as Transformation project was launched ten years ago. It was an unusually warm, sunny day in late September, and there was a big tent set up outdoors on the Wellesley campus. Hundreds of educators were there from all over the country. The proceedings were suffused with a joyful atmosphere of change, inspired by the vision of education and spirituality that Victor put forward to the crowd. The Boston Research Center and our colleagues at Soka University of America had been invited by Victor to participate; and we, too, were caught up in the excitement.

We had been attracted to the Education as Transformation project, in part, because of the Bodhisattva ethic implicit in the endeavor—that is, the commitment to working for the happiness of self and others. In the years preceding the project's launch, Victor had worked tirelessly to create an interfaith center to serve the spiritual needs of the Wellesley College community. He wanted to create the conditions for religious life to flourish in a pluralistic environment. Though deeply rooted in his own Christian tradition, he envisioned an open spiritual atmosphere in which Christianity did not dominate. The ethic of embracing religious diversity that he embodied in his work was really inspiring for us. His expansive vision was equally impressive. He was working with Peter to create something that would go beyond the Wellesley campus and encourage dialogue on religious pluralism and spirituality on campuses across the United States.

So, it's a real joy for me to come back here today and see the Education as Transformation movement thriving and for you to have created

this wonderful new Center. Thank you, Victor, for involving the Boston Research Center and the Institute of Oriental Philosophy in today's celebration.

Secondly, I'd like to say something about the idea of humanizing religion. When Dr. Kawada offered opening remarks this morning, he mentioned that SGI President Daisaku Ikeda writes a peace proposal every year and submits it to the United Nations. His most recent proposal is entitled "Humanizing Religion, Creating Peace." As I listened to the presentations throughout the day, one particular passage kept coming back to me. In it, Dr. Ikeda suggested three criteria for holding religions to account for their actual impact on human beings: 1) Does this religious tradition make people stronger or does it weaken them? 2) Does it encourage what is good or what is evil in them? 3) Are they made more wise—or less?

These very simple, yet profound, questions come from the human heart. They are a powerful challenge to the fundamentalist tendencies that can lurk within any tradition. Continuously asking these questions is a good way to immunize our traditions against the forces of dogmatism and fanaticism that so often take over, especially among the upper echelons of a tradition. Then, tragically, religious leaders end up distorting what's good in that tradition and using human beings for their own purposes, making them subservient to the aims of the religious organization itself.

Today, several of the presentations focused on the polarization that exists within traditions, describing a gap between a progressive side that's open to interfaith dialogue and a fundamentalist side that isn't. It seems to me that we could use these down-to-earth, practical questions in working within our own traditions to help bring the sides together in support of the human being.

After all, any religion that's worthy of being called a religion ought to be most concerned about the quality of life of its practitioners. Are they improving, becoming stronger, better and wiser people because of their practice of the teaching? Perhaps such questions could help stake out important common ground between the two sides of a tradition. Stale doctrinal debates could recede into the background when attention turns to the daily lives of the practitioners.

Coming up with a set of human-centered questions like the ones Dr. Ikeda proposed would not only help open up possibilities for new, fresh discussions within traditions. Such practical concerns about the day-to-day impact of religion on the lives of human beings could inspire even greater interest in the kind of interfaith dialogue that focuses not on doc-

trinal debate but on human happiness and peace. These outcomes are, after all, the great hope that religion, when practiced well, offers the world.

Thank you, everyone, for your participation today!