

A common faith

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NASSER D. KHALILI is a graduate, Associate Research Professor and Honorary Fellow at the University of London. He is Founder and Chairman of the Khalili Collections and in 1995 he set up the Maimonides Interfaith Foundation to promote understanding, cooperation and peace between Jews, Christians and Muslims. He has been awarded many honours for his work in interfaith relations including Trustee of the City of Jerusalem and knighthoods from two Popes. He became a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador in 2012.

The 15th century Persian poet Jami's profound words, 'Each tinted fragment sparkles in the sun, A thousand colours but the light is one', reminds me of the spirit of the Commonwealth – which harmonises unity and diversity in a way that no other international organisation except the United Nations does. Importantly, the Commonwealth represents a diverse range of faith traditions, including the main world religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam – as well as multiple other primal religions that are practised in the remotest parts of our gloriously diverse world. As beautiful as this diversity is, of course, it can also present some serious challenges. In a world where misconceptions about religions are a cause for violence and disunity, there is no better time to prioritise interfaith dialogue on a global scale.

No child is born to hate. We are born as human beings first, and religion is what we inherit. As I always say, the real weapon of mass destruction is ignorance. So if ignorance is the problem, education is the only solution. If we don't educate young people before they have a chance to form destructive prejudices, then we risk losing an entire generation to bigotry and mutual mistrust. Educating children from a young age will allow them to understand that there is far more that unites different faiths and traditions than divides them. Teaching children to respect each other's religions will help them to resist being wrongly brainwashed from a young age. Providing them with a moral compass for life is vital as it helps them challenge those who insist on propagating hatred and divisions.

Of course, the actual differences between us are not so great. Contrary to the message that extremists push, all religions share the same belief that we must treat each other with love, kindness, respect, and dignity regardless of faith, way of life or nationality. No religion, nation, or individual has a monopoly on truth; we all have much to learn from one another. Moreover, as human beings, we have a duty towards one another. The great 1st century Jewish leader Hillel the Elder said: 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole Torah.' In the New Testament, Jesus said: 'In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you.' The Prophet Muhammed in his Last Sermon said: 'That which you want for yourself, seek for mankind.' Buddhists are instructed to 'treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.' and Hindus are taught:

'This is the sum of duty; do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you.'

The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2015 is a tremendous opportunity to remind ourselves of this 'Common Faith', or what is widely regarded as the Golden Rule.

The quest to establish unity and harmony between people is something I am passionate about and have been actively promoting my whole life. For me, one man in history, in particular, has embodied this ideal: the 12th century polymath Moses Maimonides, one of the greatest Jewish intellectuals who thrived under Muslim leadership, and who wrote extensively on Christianity and Islam. Immersed in multiple worlds, he came to the conclusion that 'you must accept the truth from whatever source it comes'. So twenty years ago when I set up my Interfaith Foundation, I would name it after this towering figure.

As Founder and Chairman of the Maimonides Interfaith Foundation, my goal is to promote peace and dialogue between people of different religions, particularly Jews, Christians and Muslims, who together represent more than half of the world's population. Seeking to act in the spirit of Maimonides, I have tried to bring people from the three Abrahamic faiths closer together, enhancing their mutual respect and trust through a series of educational, cultural and sporting programmes. These include a creative calligraphy art initiative in partnership with the Courtauld Institute, a long-standing partnership with Arsenal Football Club to organise annual multi-faith football tournaments, an annual lecture series to discuss key issues regarding faith and communities, the commissioning of renowned artist Ben Johnson to create 5 magnificent paintings of Jerusalem titled the House of Peace, and the development of Interfaith Explorers – a pioneering free online learning resource, supported by UNESCO, the UN and the Holy See, which encourages primary school children to respect cultural and religious diversity.

The Commonwealth is an unparalleled platform through which such interfaith programmes can be adopted at the international level. Given that so much of the world's conflict so evidently emanates from cross-faith misunderstandings, we have no choice but to foster a new generation of open-minded, compassionate and mutually-respecting individuals – both at the grassroots and leadership levels.