

## **Award of certificates in Peace and Interfaith Studies – University of Mauritius**

I have to start by saying how happy I was when, a few years ago, I learnt that, following a request from the Council of Religions, the University of Mauritius was offering a course in “Peace and Interfaith Studies”. That’s because I am convinced that learning about the fundamentals of religions other than one’s own can be so enriching and can help to ward off misconceptions and prejudices that one may mistakenly have of religions other than one’s own. And for us Mauritians it would be so useful. It is misconceptions prejudices and distortions of other beliefs that are the roots of conflicts and alienation. In other words ignorance is the root of the evil.

This “Peace and Interfaith Studies” course is a fitting antidote to that ignorance. For our multicultural and multi-religious society such educational opportunities are most welcome and can go a long way to contribute to the strengthening of our treasured peaceful co-existence in our Rainbow nation.

I must confess that at some point in time I was envisaging to follow that course myself whereby I could learn more deeply about the religions of my fellow countrymen and share my own knowledge and conviction especially about my own religious beliefs.

I am happy for all of you students, who have followed the course and are going to receive your certificates today. I would like to congratulate you for your

achievements. Let me also congratulate the Council of Religions for the brilliant idea and the University of Mauritius for including that course in its prospectus.

I know that many universities abroad offer courses in comparative religions. What is interesting to note is that the course offered by the University of Mauritius includes the dimension of peace. It is a programme that links Interfaith Studies with peace.

And Peace is the ultimate objective of mankind, be it for the individual, the nation or the world. We know that it is when peace reigns that there is prosperity and happiness anywhere. In turn prosperity and happiness bring peace. That's why I say peace is the ultimate.

This is exactly what I heard cardinal Maurice Piat emphasized on when he was speaking to a gathering with the Mauritian delegation at the Vatican yesterday. He said that his mission is to work towards bringing that peace in the world through a culture of brotherhood and love.

In many countries, communities fight each other and nations go to war due to cultural and religious differences. Social tensions and war stem from feelings of fear and superiority complexes.

In the past and still in the present, to some extent, some religious denominations are going round imposing their religion on others, strong in their belief that their religion is better. Indeed conversion is rife and is causing a lot of disruption and

unhappiness in many families. This is contrary to the Peace and Interfaith Studies spirit.

The spirit here is one of tolerance, respect, sharing and appreciation.

Each religion preaches the same fundamental verities that there is One God who is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. That the essential nature of that Supreme Intelligence is LOVE. GOD is LOVE. Better still LOVE is GOD.

We know that the different religions, because of geographical and historical reasons have, over thousands of years, developed different paths, ways and methods to live and express that relationship with GOD.

With experience and hindsight, everyone agrees that today the way forward is not one world religion but an attitude of SHARING the beliefs and traditions of each other in a bid to enrich one another.

In Mauritius, the CoR can contribute to achieve this extraordinary feat.

I for one am born in a Tamil-Hindu tradition. I am very comfortable where I am and I believe I am a respectable citizen of my country.

But I should hasten to add that, for having read parts of the Bible, parts of the Quran, and some Buddhist books, for having listened to religious talks from various religious sources, I have consolidated my own original beliefs. It was

Mahatma Gandhi who said ***“I leave all my windows open to the winds of other faiths getting all the more enriched in the process but I will not let anyone of them blow me off my feet”***. He could affirm this because he was well educated in his own Hindu religion but he also said ***“ the sermon of Jesus on the mount went straight to my heart”***. At the time of the independence of India, during the partition crisis, he offered the Prime Ministership of undivided India to Ali Jinnah, a Muslim.

It is said that one of Mahatma Gandhi’s favourite prayers is ***“Vaishnava Janato”***, which has become the signal tune for the Mahatma. I have read its translation. It is a prayer that anyone can adopt. It is Universal.

I personally like that beautiful wise saying of Jesus : ***“Que celui qui n’a jamais péché, jette la première pierre”***. This is a universal wisdom everyone can adopt.

Similarly ***“C’est en donnant que l’on recoit”*** of St. Francois d’Assise” find echoes in the Tirukkural. The Tirukkural also is of universal appeal and can be adopted by anyone of any faith.

The system of Zakaat and helping the poor during Eid-UI-fitr finds echoes, I am sure, in many other religions and cultural systems. We have so much in common. But where there are differences which are worthy of adoption, it would be so unwise to say ***“No, that’s not for me”***.

I believe that interfaith studies should begin at home. It is the duty of parents to explain to their children at an early age the cosmopolitan composition of our population and inculcate in them the love for an understanding of the cultures of others. That will ward off prejudices at an early age. This basic education should be strengthened in primary and secondary schools where students of various religious backgrounds can mingle with each other during most of their childhood and adolescence. For example, for the celebration of a major festival, a student of a different ethnic group or religious background can be invited to make a presentation of that festival. This is just an idea and I leave it to educators to devise appropriate programmes in that respect.

We would rely on you, who have just completed the course on “Peace and Interfaith Studies”, to put into practice key theories and skills of interfaith leadership learned throughout course work. People need to get out of their self-imposed barriers, and appreciate the spiritual culture of their neighbours. This reminds me of Rabindranath Tagore’s lines in his poem:

***“where the mind is without fear and the head is held high.***

***Where the world has not been broken into narrow domestic walls”***

concluding with:

***“In that heaven of freedom my father, let my country awake”.***

You are now better informed to contribute in the promotion of greater mutual understanding and acceptance, and thereby harmony and peace.

Ladies and gentlemen, religion remains a strong force in the contemporary world. It is our duty to make it a unifying force for the sake of common good, peace and progress, instead of turning it into a dividing force causing hate and destruction. Let me conclude on this note and again congratulate the students for their successful completion of the course on “Peace and Interfaith Studies”, and the University of Mauritius and the Council of Religions for mounting such a course.

Let us resolve to adopt a spirit of acceptance and sharing, of learning from each other which can only lead to individual and collective upliftment and enrichment ultimately ushering an environment and a world of PEACE AND HARMONY.

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**Ag. President of the Republic of Mauritius**  
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