



“From Truth to Reconciliation and Forgiveness”

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Born and raised in Jamaica, Dr. Jacqueline C. Rivers has worked on issues of social justice and Christian activism in the black community for more than thirty years, committing her personal and professional life to the service of inner-city youth in Boston. She is the Executive Director of the Seymour Institute for Black Church and Policy Studies and served as a Hutchins Fellow at Harvard University, where she earned a Ph.D. in sociology. Dr. Rivers has lectured extensively around the world, including at Princeton University, the University of Notre Dame, the Vatican, and the United Nations. Dr. Rivers lives in Dorchester with her husband, the Reverend Eugene F. Rivers III.

It is a great privilege to address the R20 today, the first conference to bring into the G20 the discussion of the right for every individual to freely choose her religion. What illustrious company is addressing us over the next two days: President Joko Widodo of Indonesia, Professor Mary Ann Glendon of Harvard Law School, KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf, General Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board and so many others, too numerous to name. We are all grateful to the leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama and the Indonesian government for creating this historic event. This is an opportunity to advance the legitimacy of religion, reduce religious conflict and challenge the arrogant secularism, the immanent frame, of the Western world. We are indebted to our hosts, including the Center for Shared Civilizational Values, for their vision and initiative in creating this forum.

This is a conference in the tradition of the Bandung Conference of 1955. The nation of Indonesia is again playing a leading role on the global stage, advocating once again for peaceful co-existence among the nations and for the eradication of racial and religious prejudice and violence. I am humbled by the thought that I might in some very small way recall the role played by Richard Wright, the great black American novelist, who wrote about the conference to insist that the Western world pay attention to this assertion of sovereignty among newly independent nations.

I speak at this event as a black woman, a Jamaican. I speak as a Christian, redeemed by the death and resurrection of Christ. I speak as a humble servant of Jesus Christ who has sought to serve the poor, living in impoverished neighborhoods to bring hope, reduce violence and improve education for African Americans facing daunting structural obstacles. I speak as a lecturer who seeks to raise issues of racial inequity and Christian responsibility in universities and conferences in the United States. I speak as an advocate for religious freedom who seeks to advance the right of every human being to respond to his or her God-given conscience, to embrace faith in whichever religion seems right to him, or to reject all religion. I speak as one



who deeply believes that only that freedom enables true faith, to be expressed through private devotion, corporate worship and action in the public square. It is through these lenses and with these limitations that I speak. But it is also with respect for the many and widely varying religious traditions that are represented at this conference. Though I speak from my own background and experiences and commitments, I hope to appeal to the common thought and shared values that we are here to uphold today.

This panel is one on grievances and truth-telling. That is a very heavy charge in a world suffering from ubiquitous evil. There is much to confess. But confession is the first step to living in peace. So, in the spirit of confession, I would like to mention just one of the many examples of oppressive behavior carried out under the banner of Christianity. The conquest of the so-called New World by European powers starting in the fifteenth century was often justified in part by religious claims. The Roman Catholic Popes of that era claimed that lands that were inhabited by people not deemed to be the social equals of Europeans were subject to conquest by nations such as Spain.¹ On the strength of this claim the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean were subjected to near slavery in the *encomienda* system. They were worked brutally hard, isolated from key food sources and exposed to diseases to which they had no resistance. These peoples were subjected to mass baptisms, supposed conversions to Christianity. Surely actions such as these are among the historical grievances that we must address. As a Christian, I have spoken of the sins of the Christians, but which of us can say that we are not guilty of some wrongdoing? To achieve reconciliation, we must all confront our own shortcomings.

Forgiveness is the healing balm that not only frees the perpetrator but also soothes the wounds of those who forgive. In the Christian tradition, forgiveness is central to our core beliefs. God the Father forgives us our sins through the death and resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Repentance, turning away from the harm we perpetrate, unlocks forgiveness. It is the key to accessing God's forgiveness. And to accessing the forgiveness of those we have wronged. But we are called to practice forgiveness even of those who do not repent. God commands us to do as he does, to forgive as he has forgiven us.

Forgiveness is illustrated through Jesus' parable of the son who strayed. Though he abandoned his father and spent half of his father's wealth, when he returned home, his father did not punish him. He did not reject him. Instead, he greeted his son with great joy! He laid out a feast. He celebrated his return! He said, my son was dead but now is alive again. That is the Christian truth, the granting of free and full forgiveness. We who have been wronged must embrace that truth.

Such love and forgiveness are not by any means limited to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Seeking after the divine is the central motive in a wide variety of religious traditions. I regret that I have not the knowledge to expound on this truth. But let me share a few humble thoughts. In Islam Allah calls the faithful to love all people, as appropriate, since we are all the children of Adam and Eve. As the Quran says "O people, fear your Lord, Who created you of a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered many men and women..."² Surely such love is motivation for forgiveness. According to Shaykh Hamza

¹ Muldoon, James. 2015. *The Americas in the Spanish World Order: The Justification for Conquest in the Seventeenth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

² Ghazi bin Muhammad. 2011. *Love in the Holy Qur'an*. Chicago, Ill.: Kazi Publications.

Yusuf, Muslims must show *rahmah*, mercy, and must want the best, even for bad people, because the Quran teaches, "We have not sent you except as a mercy to the worlds."³

Similarly, the Buddhist tradition teaches acceptance of all people because we are all embryonic Buddhas. Further, the tradition sees all humans as being "unconditionally open, compassionate and wholesome" because we share the buddahnature.⁴ Such beliefs are a strong foundation for the practice of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is possible, my friends! It is possible. Think of the members of Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. These faithful African American Christians were attacked by a terrorist, Dylann Roof. These people welcomed Dylann Roof into their Bible study. They worshipped and prayed with him for an hour, and then he turned on them and murdered nine of them. Yet they did not seek revenge. Instead, the people of Mother Emmanuel Church forgave Roof; even people who had lost their mothers forgave Roof. Some forgave him within 48 hours of the shooting. Some forgave him even while playing a baseball game.⁵

We too must do the same. Whatever our tradition of faith, we are created by the same God, we share a common humanity, we all suffer pain when we are wronged, we all stumble; we all do wrong ourselves; we all have access to God's forgiveness. We can all experience the peace that comes from God. So, we must all confess our wrongdoing. We must all forgive those who wrong us. Through the strength that comes from God's divine power we must pursue reconciliation. We must seek God's strength to forgive. We must love as he loves us. We can do it!

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yb3CNNdsOps>

⁴ [The Practice of Love - Lions Roar](#)

⁵ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2019/06/17/emanuel-explores-power-forgiveness-after-charleston-church-massacre/1478473001/>