Religions for Peace and Harmony is not only a motto or a slogan for people of good will on this earth against any conflict, hatred and violence, but it is a call to hasten such peace and harmony through action in our respective situations. The Centre for Inter-religious and Intercultural Dialogue (CIID), Department of World Religions and Culture, the University of Dhaka, has been a dialogue partner with the Episcopal Commission for Christian Unity and Inter-religious Dialogue, Bangladesh Catholic Church (EC-CUIRD) for the past few years. These partners have worked together to enlighten younger generations from different faith communities in various levels at home and abroad, to learn about and to value each other’s beliefs.

An International Seminar on “Religions for Peace and Harmony” was jointly organized by CIID and EC-CUIRD on Tuesday, April 26, 2011 at the Senate Bhavan Auditorium of the University of Dhaka. His Eminence Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, the President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue (PCID) graced the occasion as the Chief Guest. His Excellency Archbishop Joseph Marino, Apostolic Nuncio to Bangladesh, Most Rev. Paulinus Costa, DD, Archbishop of Dhaka, Prof. Syed Anwar Husain, Editor of the Daily Sun, and Prof. Aminul Islam, President of the Bangladesh Philosophical Association were present as Special Guests. Prof. A A M S Arefin Siddique, Vice Chancellor, University of Dhaka, inaugurated the seminar. Rt. Rev. Bishop Bejoy N. D’Cruze, OMI, Chairman of the EC-CUIRD welcomed the guests, while Prof. Kazi Nurul Islam, Director of the CIID, chaired the session.

In his welcome address Rt. Rev. Bejoy N. D’Cruze, Bishop of Khulna, said that people belonging to different faiths need to work together to safeguard the values of families, to reduce poverty and to work together to overcome violence. He particularly admired the role of Pope Benedict XVI who is working hard and encouraging inter-religious unity and harmony. He also mentioned that the Pope believes in dialogue between and among people of diverse faiths and holds that dialogue is not optional but “it is a vital necessity on which in large measure our future depends.”

He also mentioned that University of Dhaka, especially the Department of World Religions and Culture, is a faithful partner of the Episcopal Commission for Inter-religious Dialogue. University of Dhaka is very active to promote and strengthen the movement of inter-religious dialogue. Every year we have several joint programs. He categorically asserted that the CIID of the Department of World Religions and Culture is contributing very much towards unity and harmony among the intellectuals as well as the common people of the country.

In his inaugural address Professor A. A. M. S. Arefin Siddique, Vice Chancellor, University of Dhaka said that more than 100 years ago Swami Vivekananda noted with profound regret that we cannot think of any kind of crime which has not been committed in the name of religion. After so many years we note with extreme sadness that religion is seen as a leading
contributor to intolerance, human rights violations and violent extremism afflicting the world in the twenty first century. Now many questions appear before us: Is religion really involved with conflicts and hatred? Again, is it true that no religion teaches violence or encourages hatred towards others? If this claim is true, then why have religious hatred, conflict and enmity prevailed and still prevail throughout the world? Should we condemn religion as a trouble maker or threat to world peace? Or, should we hold that religion can play a vital role in conflict prevention, mitigation and resolution or in peacemaking and post conflict peace building? Should we ignore that the religious traditions of the world, offer a rich abundance of insight and guidance for the phenomenon of peace? These are some of the questions which have been haunting many people of conscience throughout the world.

He regretted that the world today has fallen into great chaos which cannot be resolved easily. The entire world is afflicted with war, terrorism, arson, social crimes, injustice etc. If the world is left as it is, then it will turn into a world in which the stronger will prey upon the weaker and force alone will reign. We know that all religions have a common core in the teachings of their founders or in the teachings of their scriptures, which is: ‘love one another.’ All religions must mutually cooperate for the purpose of the new culture of peace. The core philosophy of each religion is the philosophy of love, respect and non-violence. It is expressed differently so that it may fit into each regional situation. To promote peace we must, as quickly as possible, liberate ourselves from metaphysical and theological conflicts. It is high time that religious people from all over the world should get rid of narrowness, hostility, misunderstanding, mistrust and ignorance. With mutual respect and friendship, they should build a large ‘cooperative community of religions’ to show their religious faith in action everywhere in the globe.

His Excellency Archbishop Joseph Marino, the Apostolic Nuncio to Bangladesh underscored the activities of the Centre for Inter-religious and Intercultural Dialogue of the University of Dhaka and the Episcopal Commission for Inter-religious Dialogue, Bangladesh. He recalled the day long workshop arranged by these two organizations on “Muslims and Christians: Unity in Diversity”. He contended that workshop was a concrete step towards bringing the area of inter-religious dialogue closer to the grassroots level. He also mentioned that a little over a year later there was a follow-up to that seminar which indicated a further development on the theme. Both events were marked by frank and honest exchanges of views, among people sitting together as brothers in solidarity and love. He hoped that these days when we are highlighting the importance and meaning of inter-religious dialogue will lead us to an even firmer commitment in this significant area of society today. He appreciated the role of Dhaka University particularly, the Department of World Religions and Culture of this university in promoting interfaith understanding in Bangladesh.

In his speech Most Rev. Archbishop Paulinus Costa reminded us that the Golden rule says, “Do to others whatever you would have them do to you.” None of us would like to be hated or despised; rather, we would like to be loved by everybody. We want others to love us, accept us, forgive us and behave well with us. So our responsibility is to first love others. If we love others, we can expect that others too will love us. He pointed out that the word, ‘religion’ is derived from the root word religio, which means ‘to bind together’ and religion actually does this. Religion has exercised the most profound influence over man’s thoughts since time immemorial. Even today, when the human person has made tremendous progress, especially in the fields of science and technology, he is utterly restless in his quest for some unseen powers which may give him some inspiration and solace. Every human person by nature has a quest to go beyond his existence. This quest is for the supreme knowledge. Every human heart has a thirst for love and peace. And how do we get it? ‘Love for all and hatred for none’ is or should be the teaching of all religions. So, let us love and be loved.
He further mentioned that conflicts rooted in social and economic injustices are not the only manifestation of disharmony in the world today. Through the centuries, groups, communities or nations have been caught in the web of conflicts, often waging wars, on the basis of ethnic, racial, religious and cultural differences frequently perceived as threats to particular social existence.

The people of diverse cultural origins and different religious persuasions need to, and can establish lasting bonds of peaceful relations through sincere inter-religious dialogue. Inter-religious dialogue provides new elements of unity and harmony among peoples for a new era of peace in the world. Peace begets peace. A peaceful person brings peace in the society through words, actions and exemplary life. Let us be peace-makers.

Professor Syed Anwar Husain mentioned that interfaith dialogue has both intra and interfaith perspectives. Any religiousist taking part in any such dialogue has, first of all, to be properly schooled in his own faith. If schooled as such, he will find that his religion provides enough material for him to be an inclusive person, rather than being an exclusive one. As a Muslim he feels it his sacred duty to share the fact that the word ‘Islam’ by its etymological origin does not only mean peace, the faith also enjoins upon its practitioners the salient practice of ta’ruf, which is an Arabic word meaning ‘to know others’. The implication of ta’ruf is that no Muslim can be a true Muslim without knowing and endearing other religiousists. Any fanaticism on the part of any Muslim castigating or denigrating other religions goes against the spirit and essence of Islam. Any Muslim, and for that matter, any religiousist is required to be what Benjamin Disraeli stated, "Sensible men are all of the same religion".

Professor Aminul Islam deplored the widespread erosion of moral values and the terrible state of tension and dissension prevailing all over the world. He underscored the value of such an interfaith dialogue conference in promoting cooperation among the people of different faiths and building a society of peace and harmony. Dialogue, he added, is the best way to dispel misgivings about religion and to let everyone know that despite differences in respect of external rituals, the essence of religions is the same—unity and welfare of all men irrespective of caste and creed. Indeed, all religions teach unity and fraternity and exhort the adherents to rise above narrow sectarianism and respect the views of others. Professor Islam concluded by urging all to use their respective religious faith as a potent force in securing durable peace and happiness in the trouble-torn present world.

In his address as the Chief Guest, His Eminence Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran asserted that we all are facing the reality that we live and develop in multi-cultural and multi-religious societies. To say this is to state the obvious. There is no religiously homogenous society. In Europe, from kindergarten onwards, young children rub shoulders with companions of all origins and different religious affiliations. There is nothing surprising about this if one thinks of what Paul Tillich wrote: "Religion is the substance of culture". History knows no non-religious cultures!

He categorically asserted that we are all called to dialogue. What is dialogue? It is the search for an inter-understanding between two individuals with a view to a common interpretation of their agreement or their disagreement. It implies a common language, honesty in the presentation of one's position and the desire to do one's utmost to understand the point of view of others.

Applied to inter-religious dialogue, these presuppositions make it easier to understand that in the context of religion, it is not a question of being "kind" to others in order to please them! Nor is it a matter of negotiation. In inter-religious dialogue it is a question of taking a risk, not of giving up my own convictions but of letting myself be called into question by the convictions of another, accepting to take into consideration arguments different than my own or those of my community. All religions, each one in its own way, strive to respond to the
enigmas of the human condition. Each religion has its own identity but this identity enables us to take the religion of the other into consideration. It is from this that dialogue is born. Identity, otherness and dialogue go together. We do not say, "All religions are of equal value". We say, "All those in search of God have equal dignity"!

He reminded everybody that it is always in the interest of leaders of societies to encourage inter-religious dialogue and to draw on the spiritual and moral heritage of religions for a number of values likely to contribute to harmony, to encounters between cultures and to the consolidation of the common good. Moreover, all religions, in different ways, urge their followers to collaborate with all those who endeavor to:
-- assure respect for the dignity of the human person and his fundamental rights;
-- develop a sense of brotherhood and mutual assistance;
-- draw inspiration from the "know-how" of communities of believers who, at least once a week, gather together millions of widely differing people in the context of their worship in authentic spiritual communion;
-- help the men and women of today to avoid being enslaved by fashion, consumerism and profit alone.

Unfortunately, however, other factors contribute to foster a fear of religions:
-- the fact that we are very often ignorant of the content of other religions;
-- the fact that we have not met the believers of other religions;
-- our reticence in confronting other believers for the simple reason that we do not have very clear ideas about our own religion!
-- and then, of course, the acts of violence or terrorism perpetrated in the name of a religion.
-- And, further, the difficulties encountered in practicing their faith by believers belonging to minority groups in countries where a majority religion enjoys a privileged status because of history or law.

In order to remedy this situation it is necessary to:
-- have a clear-cut spiritual identity: to know in whom and in what one believes;
-- consider the other not as a rival, but as a seeker of God;
-- agree to speak of what separates us and of the values that unite us.

He mentioned the "Open Letter" of the 138 Muslim leaders addressed to Christian religious leaders in 2007. He holds that it opportunely stressed that Christian and Muslims represent 55% of the world population and consequently, if they are faithful to their own religion, they can do a lot for the common good, for peace and harmony in the society of which they are members. Such a context is favorable for calmly tackling ancient, thorny "subjects": the question of the rights of human beings, the principle of freedom of conscience and of religion, reciprocity with regard to places of worship.

He reiterated that what engenders fear is above all a lack of knowledge of the others. It is necessary for us to first become acquainted with one another in order to love one another and to collaborate! This is God's will. As Pope Benedict XVI said in Turkey: "We are called to work together, so as to help society to open itself to the transcendent, giving Almighty God his rightful place..." Ankara, 28 November 2006.

At the end of his learned and thought provoking speech he pointed out that believers of all religions are heralds of a two-fold message:

1. Only God is worthy of adoration. Therefore all the idols made by men (wealth, power, appearance, hedonism) constitute a danger for the dignity of the human person, God's creature.
2. In God's sight, all men and women belong to the same race, to the same family. They are all called to freedom and to encounter Him after death.
He also mentioned that the believers are prophets of hope. They do not believe in fate. They know that gifted by God with a heart and intelligence, they can with His help, change the course of history in order to orientate their life according to the project of the Creator: that is to say, make of humanity an authentic family of which each one of us is a member. Anyway, for us Christians we must always remember Paul's exhortation in the letter to the Romans: "Let us then pursue what leads to peace and to building up one another." (14:19) It is a beautiful roadmap!

He reminded everybody that we must be humble. We have not explained God! We have to stop on the threshold of mystery, "the Mystery of God where man is grasped instead of grasping, where he worships instead of reasoning, where he himself is conquered, instead of conquering" (Karl Rahner).

In his presidential address Professor Kazi Nurul Islam asserted that all the religions of the world, without any exception, teach and preach universal love. However, it is a matter of great regret that most of the followers of different religions are not aware of the ethical teachings of their traditions. They are prone to lay more emphasis on ceremonies and rituals than on the essence of their religions. Again, for centuries, religions have been used, misused and abused by some politicians and half-educated and/or ill-educated so-called religious scholars or clerics. They misguide the general mass. As a result we find fanatics in every religion. Everywhere in the world, these fanatics resort to politics in the name of religion.

It is high time that we take a firm determination to get rid of this crisis. From his experience with the people of different faiths in different parts of the globe, Professor Kazi confidently asserted that ignorance of other faiths as well as of one’s own faith is the root cause of inter-religious hatred, enmity and conflict. He firmly asserted that the best way to get rid of this unwholesome situation is to return to an objective study of religions and to this end, he suggested that the ethical teachings of the major religions of the world should be made compulsory at the primary schools everywhere in the world. Besides, at the college level a course on world religions should be made compulsory. This would help make future generation enlightened and worthy citizens of the world. As a result, the followers of every religion would work as ambassadors of his or her own religion and a peaceful world would no more remain a dream.

No peace among the nations, Professor Kazi warned, is possible without peace among the religions. Again, there cannot be any peace among the religions without dialogue between and among religions. And dialogue among religions is impossible without sound knowledge of religious traditions. Therefore, in order to promote peace on earth the followers of every religion should and must have knowledge of their own tradition as well as the tradition of others.

Dr. Fr. Tapan Camillus De Rozario, Asst. Professor of the DWRC, University of Dhaka gave animation throughout the seminar quoting from the Sacred Texts related to “Religions for Peace and Harmony”:

1. “Perfect peace can dwell only where all vanity has disappeared.” (Lord Buddha)
2. “Blessed are the peace makers, they shall be recognized as children of God.” (Jesus Christ)
3. “As rivers flow into ocean but cannot make the vast ocean overflow, so flow the stream of the sense-world into the sea of peace that is sage.” (Bhagavad-Gita , II, 70)
4. It was He who made His tranquility descend into the hearts of the believers, to add faith to their faith. (Al-Quran, 48:4)

He strongly noted that our time is to promote dialogue and interaction in the place of misunderstanding, suspicion, distrust and hatred, as a means of peace and harmony. Dialogue
has practically emerged in our contemporary society as one of the very effective instrument of peace, harmony and fellowship amongst the people. Almost all characteristics of all religions are basically the same and hence it should not be impossible or difficult task to have a communion of minds and hearts of all humans provided we have a will for that and make a sincere and determined effort in that direction.

He also emphasized that in order to grow and prosper; a nation needs mutual respect, trust and cooperation among its citizens. We need to learn, or relearn, to live together and collaborate with one another to build our nation, our modern world. We need to celebrate Unity in Diversity and promote peace and harmony.

Dr. Rozario concluded the seminar by his vote of thanks to all the guests, speakers, Chair, participants and organizing collaborators from home and abroad. He quoted Pope Paul VI: “If we wish to have true peace, we must give it a soul. The soul of peace is love. It is love that gives life peace, more than victory or defeat, more than self interest or fear or weariness or need. The soul of peace is love, which for us believers comes from the love of God and expresses itself in love for men.”