

The greatest spiritual question of them all is, 'Is there life before death?' Life, not death, has always been the fundamental spiritual question of every great spiritual tradition. . . .

It is time for women to assume as much responsibility for maintaining the life of the world as they do for bearing the life of the world. Otherwise we birth one world to destroy the other. . . .

This is, indeed, a most religious moment. Why? Because religion is fast becoming the most dangerous thing the world has to offer. Religion has become, in other words, religion's worst enemy. It is time for women -- the other half of the human race -- the other face of God! -- to save both their religions and their nations. Women, the life bearers, must now give to the world the spiritual life the world lacks. . . .

It is time for women to speak a public voice against the wars that men have designed to "protect them" without ever putting women themselves at the tables where only a few men decide to wage war and governments refuse to negotiate them. . . .

Indeed, this is an historic religious moment. It is time for women to take their place in making real the religions they believe in. It is time for women to become an organized, international spiritual voice for peace, a religious critic of national policies that threaten both the life of the world, and the clear signs of peace on the local level everywhere. It is time for women to reach across borders that men will not breach to take the hands of the other -- not to bind them but to bond them. It is time for women's analyses of world situations and women's solutions to conflict to be heard -- in a world where scientists just this month announced that women's brains are simply better wired than men's to deal with conflict.

I am asking, therefore, that in the name of Brahma, the Buddha Yahweh, Jesus, and the Prophet we plead, press, and pray that the United Nations institutionalize what it alone has had the courage to create today: a public rostrum and a universal call to the women religious leaders of the world to monitor, create and publicly critique new initiatives for peace under the status and aegis of the UN -- to bring feeling to the irrationality of reason, to be strong enough not to destroy the weak and courageous enough to develop new ideas rather than new weapons.

The philosopher Camus wrote: "The saints of our time are those who refuse to be either its executioners or its victims." It is time for religious women to put the world on notice that we will not go on silently supporting war -- either its victims or its executioners, not only to make safe the world but to make real the religions we revere, so that life before death can come, as God wants, for us all.

Say yes to life. *Yes* to life. Always, always yes to life.

**United Nations Conference:
The Global Peace Initiative
of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders**

Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister

Palais Des Nations, Geneva, 7 October 2002

I am haunted by a story: In hard times past, a seeker begged the Holy One: "Answer the greatest spiritual question of them all, Is there life after death?"

And the Holy One said: "Ah, but the greatest spiritual question of them all is not, Is there life after death?"

"The greatest spiritual question of them all is, Is there life before death?"

Life, not death, has always been the fundamental spiritual question of every great spiritual tradition.

But if it is true that all religion seeks the God of life, it is also true that life-giving, not death-dealing, has always been the particular province of women. It is women who have borne the sons their fathers sent to war. It is women who have buried the men on whom their lives depended. It is women who have been left alone, babies in their arms, babies in their

bellies to deal with the madness that came from the madness of war.

Indeed women have a place to fill, a stake to claim, and a role to play in the world's pursuit of peace. It is time for women to assume as much responsibility for maintaining the life of the world as they do for bearing the life of the world. Otherwise we birth one world to destroy the other.

Violence on the scale it is practiced now and here and by us -- 250 wars in the 20th century alone, 23 of them raging right now, each of them with a religious component -- is clearly a sin against the sacrament of life.

We stand on the brink of human extinction boasting that we seek the God of life. Millions of dead, trillions of dollars used for destruction rather than human development, thousands of civilian refugees roaming the world tonight . . . most of them, you know very well, women . . . give the lie to the claim that we are really religious people.

Violence has simply run its course: old war is now obsolete. War now is much more than military conflict alone. It is social annihilation. It is the displacement of the innocent, the destruction of the beautiful, and the disfigurement of the souls of the young who watch it rage on TV sets around this world. These are wounds from which the human spirit never wholly recovers. Where is religion in that? Religion, history tells us, has been often used in the service of the secular. But spirituality is about enlightenment -- the ability to see beyond all the things we make 'God' in order to find God. And it is enlightenment we need.

We make 'religion' God and so we fail to see godliness in religions other than our own -- but look around you -- goodness and holiness are constants everywhere. We make 'national honor' God and fail to see the presence of God in other peoples. We make 'human color gender' the color and gender of God and fail to see God in the one who comes in different shades and other forms though our scriptures are clear about equality and our theology is sound.

We separate spirit and matter as if they were two different things, though we know now that matter is simply a density of the same energy that is the base of everything.

To be really enlightened, then, is to be in touch not only with the God within us, but around us, as well. The real religious know that God is radiant light, blazing fire, colorless wind, asexual spirit. God is no one's pigment, no one's flag, and no one's gender. And those who certify their God under any of those credentials make a new idol in the desert.

To be religious women -- spiritual leaders, in other words -- we must lead beyond our religions to the goals for which all religions exist: the life of God, in us and around us, both here and hereafter. Religion is at base, and at best, a cosmic call to cosmic consciousness.

So, this is indeed an historic moment: never before in history has an international organization recognized the untapped potential of women spiritual leaders as a necessary force in the peace-making process of a world in chaos. And, God willing, let it not be too late.

This is, indeed, a most religious moment. Why? Because religion is fast becoming the most dangerous thing the world has to offer. Religion has become, in other words, religion's worst enemy. It is time for women -- the other half of the human race -- the other face of God! -- to save both their religions and their nations. Women, the life bearers, must now give to the world the spiritual life the world lacks.

"Holy One," the disciples asked, "what's the difference between knowledge and enlightenment?" And the Holy One replied: "When you have knowledge you light a torch to find the way. When you have enlightenment you become a torch to show the way."

It is time for women to bring spiritual light to show the way to a world adoring at the shrine of the God of death. Women must say 'no' to death dealt in the name of Brahma, Buddha, Yahweh, the Prophet and crusading reprisals in the name of Jesus.

It is time for women to speak a public voice against the wars that men have designed to 'protect them' without ever putting women themselves at the tables where only a few men decide to wage war and governments refuse to negotiate them.

Indeed, this is an historic religious moment. It is time for women to take their place in making real the religions they believe in. It is time for women to become an organized, international spiritual voice for peace, a religious critic of national policies that threaten both the life of the world, and the clear signs of peace on the local level everywhere. It is time for women to reach across borders that men will not breach to take the hands of the other -- not to bind them but to bond them. It is time for women's analyses of world situations and women's solutions to conflict to be heard -- in a world where scientists just this month announced that women's brains are simply better wired than men's to deal with conflict.

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