

Dalai Lama defends Islam at anti-terror religious meeting

Mon, Apr 17, 2006 | AFP , SAN FRANCISCO

The Dalai Lama defended Islam at an historic religious gathering in San Francisco on Saturday, saying suicide bombings were tragic "mischief" that could plague any religion.

The Dalai Lama took center stage at an unprecedented anti-terror summit with Muslim clerics and other religious leaders from around the world.

Tibet's spiritual leader came in response to a prominent California imam's invitation to help form a "United Nations of Religion" devoted to countering extremist violence.

Imam Seyed Mehdi Khorasani said the idea came after he met Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso in the US state of Idaho late last year.

Religious leaders and academics from approximately 30 countries were brought to San Francisco, which Khorasani said was selected because it was where the UN was founded.

Among the supporters of the religious solidarity movement was former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid, leader of that country's largest Muslim organization Nadhlatul Ulama, which boasts 40 million members.

Holland Taylor delivered a letter from Wahid praising the gathering and offering to align himself with the Dalai Lama in future meetings of the newly established group.

"What is going on is a struggle for the soul of Islam," Taylor said, adding that Wahid and other top Muslim leaders were on the Dalai Lama's side in the "tug-of-war" against religious extremism.

Taylor referred to Sunni and Shiite leaders forming a public alliance with the Dalai Lama as "ideological jujitsu" to deflect the power of radicals and unite moderates that represent "the true heart of Islam."

Organizers heralded the assembly as the establishment of a multi-religious body that will work to quell violence and promote harmony between people of different faiths.

"Nowadays, to some people, the Muslim tradition appears more militant. I feel that's totally wrong. Muslim, like any other tradition, is the practice of compassion," the Dalai Lama told an invitation-only crowd of 500 people gathered in the Mark Hopkins Hotel on Nob Hill to hear him speak with other religious leaders.

Suicide bombings and other violence by extremists have unfairly skewed the world's perception of Islam, the Dalai Lama said.

"Such mischievous people are not just in the Muslim community, but among the Hindus, the Christians, the Buddhists," he said. "In any community, a few mischievous people are always there."

The Dalai Lama urged the leaders of all faiths to stand together on their common ground to defend Islam and promote the ideal of respecting the faiths of individuals while embracing religious diversity in communities.

"In some respects, I am one of the defenders of Muslim tradition," the Dalai Lama said. "If one believer, one tradition, is getting criticism, we have to act."

The Dalai Lama lauded the example of India, where Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Buddhists live as neighbors.

"When I see conflict in the name of religion in Ireland, Pakistan and now in Iraq," the Dalai Lama said, "then I think India's tradition of living together in religious harmony is wonderful."

Modern cultures are so unavoidably entwined that it is vital to foster respect between people of different religions, he said.

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