

THE CENTRALITY OF LIBERAL EDUCATION IN
FOSTERING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN OUR WORLD:

Welcoming Remarks to the Conference on Religious
Diversity and Respect

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Welcome to Cordiner Hall on the Whitman College campus. My name is George Bridges, and I have the honor of serving as Whitman College's 13th president.

On behalf of the faculty, staff and students at Whitman we are pleased to welcome and introduce the Conference on Religious Diversity and Respect, and we wish to thank the Walla Walla Race Unity Coalition for convening the conference and scheduling the wonderful array of conversations and meetings that comprise the conference. I also want to thank the participants for joining us today from across the region and Ambassador Hassouna for joining us from Washington, D.C.

Whitman College was chartered in 1883 to provide a liberal arts and sciences undergraduate education within an independent, nonsectarian and residential college. We are a community that offers rigorous academic learning and that encourages creativity, character and responsibility.

We are also a community that celebrates the prosperity of diversity. Each of us brings to the people around us – our community – differences in background, culture and beliefs that enrich learning and living.

This conference on religious diversity is, I believe, of absolutely critical importance, not only to our region, but to the world and to future generations.

Religious faith, as I know from my own experience, can be a source of tremendous personal strength and comfort. It can provide a moral compass, a connection to the eternal, and a solid foundation from which we make the small and large

decisions of life. Faith communities – in which people of like commitments gather together – have made changes for extraordinary good in the world for generations upon generations.

But as we all know, religious disagreements and intolerance have also led to some of the most destructive and hateful events in human history. In addition to our amazing capacity for love and connection to others, human beings have a terrible capacity to harm one another. As history has shown again and again, often the justifications for such harm rest upon disagreements with the other's ethnic, racial and/or religious views.

One of the very alarming outcomes of September 11th, in my mind, has been the proliferation of “us versus them,” “good versus evil” messages perpetrated throughout the world. The more we believe in these messages and indulge our hatred of the foreign or unfamiliar “other,” the more we foreclose the possibility of working collaboratively toward cooperative, nonviolent solutions to very real global problems.

As the leader of this college, which hopes to challenge, educate and prepare members of the next generation of our world's leaders, this is particularly alarming to me. If we teach our young to hate their generation of “others” around the world, we potentially sacrifice not only their intellectual and moral freedom --to choose, to think through problems, to question facile messages of intolerance--but also we compromise their effectiveness as engaged, committed citizens of a global future. We cannot afford to let this happen.

As the events of the 20th and early 21st centuries have shown us, humans have become increasingly sophisticated at mobilizing technologies (from bombs to planes to chemical weapons) in our horrible wars on one another. Thus, I don't think it is overstating the case to argue the very survival of the human race in the 21st century may hang in the balance. If humans are to survive and cooperate rather than destroy one another, we must learn to live respectfully and cooperatively together, collaboratively tackling the very real problems that face our world today. One of the most important elements to this learning is to build a solid foundation of religious understanding, tolerance and respect.

So I am grateful to all of you for actively engaging this process, for doing the difficult but critically necessary work of building toward a cooperative, rather than a destructive, human future.

Thank you.