# G20 Interfaith Forum 2020, October 13-17

**Religious actors and multilateral responses to the COVID-19 crisis: Priorities and accountability**

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*Moderator:*

Prof. Katherine Marshall, Vice President of the G20 Interfaith Association; Senior Fellow of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, Georgetown University, USA; Executive Director of World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD)

*Speakers:*

* Dr. Tamader Al-Rammah, Member of the United Nations Committee of Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Former Vice-Minister of the Ministry of Labor and Social Development, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
* Mr. Somboon (Moo) Chungprampree, Executive Secretary of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB)
* H.E. The Most Reverend Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah, Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Sokoto, Nigeria
* Prof. Jonatas Machado, Professor of International Public Law and European Union Law at University of Coimbra, Portugal
* Ms. Ruth Messinger, Global Ambassador of the American Jewish World Service (AJWS)
* Prof. Juan G. Navarro Floria, Professor of Law at Pontificia Universidad Catolica, Argentina
* Dr. Canon Sarah Snyder, Archbishop of Canterbury’s Advisor for Reconciliation, UK

The two-hour panel discussion addressed issues of trust and accountability, focusing on specific links to the COVID-19 emergencies. The discussion built on the six regional consultations that preceded the G20 Interfaith Forum and on the continuing focus of the G20 Interfaith Association on religious engagement in governance and specifically anti-corruption activities (see [draft policy brief on governance and accountability)](https://www.g20interfaith.org/policy-briefs/). The discussion involved exchanges among seven panelists, from six different regions, each of whom has long-standing involvement in interfaith and policy action to address the issues concerned. Three topics dominated the discussion: first, the impact of the COVID-19 emergencies on government-religion relationships, with noteworthy and parallel calls for governments to respect and engage with religious institutions and for religious actors to confront government inaction and “speak truth to power”; second the imperative of acting to support the most vulnerable communities, including particularly women, refugees, and religious minorities; and third, the urgent need to engage religious actors more actively and directly in national and international efforts to address corrupt practices. One panelist highlighted religious communities as weavers, their looms linking local, national, and international threads and different sectors of society. The need for dialogue: interreligious but also religious/secular was emphasized throughout, as was the vital role of strengthening society’s moral standing on a foundation of human rights and care and convern for the most vulnerable.

The moderator, Katherine Marshall, framed the broad issues of accountability that are linked to challenges around trust, in governments and in institutions more broadly. What are the issues for religious institutions and leaders and how do they relate to the G20? Human rights and accountability for funds dedicated to responding to the COVID-19 emergency deserve priority attention and they center around issues of trust.

**Dr. Tamader Al Ramah,** speaking from Saudi Arabia**,** brought her wide experience as an advocate for human rights to the discussion, observing that if there is one lesson we take from the Forum, it is the challenge to human rights, linked to the need to recognize and address inequalities. These issues belong on every government agenda. Solidarity is a must, as no one can do it alone. Religious leaders can play a huge role in facing these issues. She focused on problems of discrimination and particularly its effects on women, where issues have economic and social dimensions. The increases in domestic violence reported during the COVID-19 emergency are sad and tangible evidence of the challenges women face as they struggle to keep their jobs, care for children, and address violence against children and themselves. The impact of the crisis on refugees and other vulnerable groups demands the efforts of religious leaders to work on international human rights.

**Somboon (Moo) Chungprampree** noted that over 10,000 people are protesting today against the government in Bangkok. They reflect people’s loss of trust in the main institutions in the country, including the military and others. The government, civil society, and people have managed the COVID pandemic quite well, but help to the poor especially has many gaps. Religious groups and civil society have helped a lot. Thailand has faced and emerged from successive crises over the years but there are real challenges right now.

**Ruth Messinger**, in New York, commented that governments so often disappoint. Systemic inequities are linked to the reality that governments (including in the United States) do not respond well to their responsibilities and circumstances they confront. People then lose trust. American Jewish World Service (AJWS) never focuses only on service but seeks to help move people to their own sense of justice, which means human rights. The pandemic is too often used to deny some groups their rights. Groups are discriminated against by their own governments. This saps faith in governments and makes the work of faith institutions even more critical. As faith groups, we need to look at roles of governments, including corrupt roles. Holding governments accountable is critical.

**Juan Navarro Floria,** in Argentina, highlighted that the issues of accountability and religious roles were a highlight of the Latin America regional G20 Interfaith meetings. Latin America faces many COVID infections, and the region is among the most affected worldwide. The crisis accentuates structural problems that were faced before, including severe inequalities. Many basic rights, including health care, water, etc. are lacking and governments have failed to provide these services. Religious communities play critical roles, differently among the many different traditions. A marked characteristic of Latin America is dialogue and peaceful collaboration among these different traditions. Except for very isolated cases the solidarity has been exemplary, including compliance with public health directives. Religious communities have put themselves art the service of the most vulnerable. Interreligious action has characterized the response and has made it much better. Dialogue and cooperation have increased. Religious freedom has been unnecessarily damaged, however, with unnecessary or excessive restrictions on both gatherings but also religious assistance to people. Regulations have been harsh and gone against religious freedom. Corruption in different forms in present, also a large and continuing problem that demands attention.

**Jónatos Machado** with academic and practical experience as an international law professor, highlighted that religious communities can be part of the solution but also part of the problems. Some have responded well and relevantly, meeting real needs. He highlighted throughout the importance of interfaith dialogue but also faith dialogue with public authorities. Religious communities can, however, also be part of the problem, with, for example, simplistic theological interventions or efforts to score theological points. Religious communities need to recognize their roles in a humble spirit. The same goes for governments, with “my government first” attitudes not constructive or conducive to harmony and action. Interdependent sovereignty is what is most critical, including participation in international bodies, using them as a means to promote dialogue. Nationalism, rivalry, conflict, even war are real dangers. Policies that include people are vital. COVID-19 has shown how vulnerable people are, with special concerns for migrants and asylum seekers who are especially vulnerable. They need our engagement. The European Union has a central role to promote interdependent solidarity instead of useless nationalism. Integrity and good governance have been promoted for many years but COVID-19 has increased possibilities of corruption with large transfers of money. We need transparency and accountability as well as the role of civil society. Religious communities need to do their own work and live up to the standards of accountability they promote.

**Canon Sarah Snyder** began by observing that reconciliation should be understood as healing, notably what is broken. Faith actors need to be involved in healing, with COVID-19 revealing how much is broken. She highlighted the complexities around how corruption is understood. Social norms influence people in countless ways and clashing world views can pit religious and secular values in seeming opposition. Obedience, for example may take precedence in some settings even if leaders may not be god-fearing. We are regularly confronted with conflicting values, including in understanding responsibilities to others. It is thus important to identify the messages people receive and how there may be conflicting messages and values involved. Religious teaching seems to have little influence on corruption, so their interpretation and the ways in which they are lived are important. Moral reasoning can play important roles in community opinion forming. Religious and ethical education needs to teach such critical thinking skills, assuring that they need not conflict with religious values. She urged a careful look at scriptural reasoning, a tool which can be effective in addressing these issues in meaningful ways.

**Bishop Kukah**, speaking from Sokoto, Nigeria, observed that corruption lives side by side with religiosity. When systems don’t work and the state is dysfunctional and political class cannot be trusted and security in homes is not assured, the tendency to look to God is strong. In Nigeria the COVID-19 crisis caught all sectors unawares. Even at the beginning (pre-crisis), service delivery was poor, corruption strong, and poverty widespread. It was inevitable that COVID-19 responses would be caught in this web. The Church has always responded favorably, with a Gospel of love and coming to people’s assistance. Around the world the Church has always stood side by side with people. There are, however, strong shortcomings in infrastructure on which to build. Interreligious bodies in Nigeria do bring and hold groups together. Different churches did respond, even if differently. There were meetings, looking to strategies. Raising funds was an issue. But every diocese developed its own structures, and this made it easier to respond. The need for religious bodies to put their own houses in order became clear in many instances. In the response, churches put the most urgent problems first: shelter and food, and people responded favorably. But planning was difficult. An important sequence of events was that initially there were great, even inflated fears about COVID, that people would fall dead on the streets. When this did not happen, people relaxed and this contributed to myths spreading about what was going on. A lot of people still think that COVID only happens to big people, people traveling abroad. Reaching out to some groups like the association of beggars has helped, building on a collective sense of vulnerability. Nigeria’s bureaucracy has always been notoriously corrupt; once you create a bureaucracy, service delivery is difficult. Key lessons are the reality of collective vulnerabilities and the importance of standing together. Actions that showed that it is possible to pull together (like making available Catholic hospitals across Nigeria) were an opportunity to demonstrate good will. The hope is to build on this.

**Katherine Marshall** (as moderator) highlighted the diversity of experience that panel members described, from different world regions and the involvement of panel members in the regional consultations. All have grappled with questions about how religious leaders are responding to the COVID crisis, especially in relation to the G20. Three questions were put for the second round of discussions: how is the COVID crisis affecting government/religion relationships, how do we translate the will, energy, and experience of religious communities together with other actors, to support vulnerable communities into action, and third the management of new and massive kinds of financial assistance and the complexities around corruption issues. The international integrity coalitions do not systematically include religious communities. As corruption causes rage all over the world, it is fuel for fundamenalists and extremists, on the right and left, so cooperation and action are priorities.

**Bishop Kukah** focused on these issues during the Africa regional consultation. He linked the view that religion has often been seen as a problem to the legacies of the Cold War and the necessity of rethinking attitudes following 1989. Governments are coming, often reluctantly, to take religions more seriously but with extremisms of different kinds growing, religion can be an elephant in the room. Dialogue therefore is critical. But it can be effective only if governments do what they are supposed to do. State governors or presidents see dialogue as religious leaders getting together, patting each other on the back, and agreeing on how things should be. These moral exhortations, however, often have little relevance with realities. When there are scarcities, real problems arise. Favoritism makes it all very complicated. This is a battle in Nigeria. The government has steered many resources into the hands of Muslims, creating tensions and anxieties. “Being in” has to do with your religion or ethnicity. Dialogue becomes very difficult as does management of resources. Public authorities do not play by the rules. Religious affiliation allows making claims, but the so-called conflicts between Muslins and Christians are really more about who is in or out. What is needed is ways to hold governments to account. People often forget they may be a majority in one place but not in another. Politicians tend to pay back and compensate people for losses and marginalization they have experienced before. This creates tensions in many part of Africa, with the divides along ethnic and religious lines. Fighting corruption should involve the churches. The new Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* makes the point very eloquently. Corruption is not just stealing money. It is about an environment where people do not feel comfortable or safe. Bringing religious voices in in ways that do not compound the problem can help in addressing the problems.

We need to increase the moral tone of the conversation, he argued. Human rights, compassion, and citizenship need to be grounded on sound moral foundations. There is a need for greater openness, for example for people to change their religion. Greater enforcement of rights to religion is important. If religious leaders are at the table, with moral distance, objectivity, and neutrality, them can improvethe situation. We should encourage our people to trust government and political leaders, but only if they think it is just and fair.

**Ruth Messinger** addressed the polarization and disparities in the United States. She underscored the complex relationships between faith institutions and governments, including the reluctance of some to call out governments that do not treat all people equally. When something goes array, we do not have enough mechanisms to hold governments accountable. In the US, the mobilization of resources is not addressing the problems. which include unbelievable levels of stress and grief. We need to be whistleblowers, holding governments to account, for their duty to be open and meet the needs of the most vulnerable. Faith leaders and communities should not retreat to their own bubbles, but commit followers and ourselves to advocacy, identifying inequities and failings. Faith institutions need to play roles in advocating for governments that are accountable. “We believe that faith leaders can play a role in holding governments to account and rebuilding faith in governments.”

**Katherine Marshall** highlighted speaking truth to power, more difficult in some cases, look to religious leaders to confront real issues. Seeing some in the pandemic.

**Somboon (Moo) Chungprampree** pointed to the importance of seeing and understanding the complex blend of the religious and non-religious. Every crisis is an opportunity, witness the changes that followed World War II, with nation-building that gave governments wealth and power. Yet the nation state can harm communities. Governments, like religious groups, can be useful and harmful. We need to use the crisis so that local communities and their civil societies build back stronger, playing the roles of checks and balances, collaborating on some issues but not on others. There is also a need to build back international mechanisms, including the United Nations, in the same spirit. In this period, global institutions need to provide support but go down to local religious organizations in their understanding and action.

**Dr. Tamader Al Ramah** argued that relationships between religious leaders and governments need to be harmonized. Sometimes religious voices are heard more than governments, but governments have constitutional roles to address inequalities, rights, and discrimination. Some groups are especially hard hit during the pandemic. COVID-19 recognizes no borders and highlights how fragile societies are, challenging them in new ways. Religious leaders should translate ethical values, uniting with community development projects and institutions to implement human rights. Transparency and accountability are crucial, making clear where the money is going and whether it is used equitably. Engagement and dialogue are the solution. If we don’t solve the problems now, we will face more challenges with each crisis that will surely come. It is important not to wait until the problems are too big to handle.

**Professor Machado** emphasized the central role today of dialogue, interreligious and religion/secular. There is, he argued, no real consensus on human rights. Some topics are very controversial and require continuous dialogue and engagement. These include migration, abortion, and sexual identities, which are all hyper polarized, generating hate speech and anti-migrant speech, fake news, and conspiracy theories. Because there is not dialogue, compromised and serious rational discussion is lacking. Different groups want to control the congress, the executive, the courts, the United Nations, the Human Rights Council, etc. In all fields there is a toxic atmosphere that should be addressed. Religious communities, in the spirit of Fratelli Tutti, attempt to bring in some rationality, reasonableness, and serenity into the debates. Thus religious actors have roles to play, agreeing to disagree, seeking common ground, common commitment to truth, justice, solidarity, and peace. Their fundamental values can address the toxic environment that is dominant, with the United States and example. There is a need for regulation of the media. In the US and Brazil, for example, populist discourse is taking over. We need the critical engagement and dialogic approach.

The G20 interfaith dialogue is so timely and important, an opportunity to change course of world events, including restoring faith in human rights, which is above all about caring for the most vulnerable in society.

**Canon Snyder**. In some parts of the world, senior government officials are religious actors, so they have huge roles to play, with a capacity to speak truth to power, for example in South Sudan. Elsewhere, multinational and national leaders have a very secular worldview, and religious leaders do not feel welcome. The secular governments are not seen as neutral. How can we, she asks, open spaces at the most senior levels where religious leaders feel welcome. How do we reach the most vulnerable communities, including women, refugees, who are often themselves the first responders. There is a need to recognize that they can open ways to help others.

**Juan Navarro Floria** focused on the issues of corruption, which are very present in Latin America. Religions need to be aware of the importance of avoiding corruption in their own institutions. But they can play critical roles. An advisory council of some sort could play an important role. Dialogue among religious traditions goes well in Latin America, but dialogue between religions and the state deserves more attention. The place for discussion of politics is the Congress, but there are other options for useful dialogue. Now in the COVID-19 emergency, the presence of religious voices can highlight that health goes beyond the body and includes spiritual needs. The G20 would benefit from having religious voices at the table. Having the G20 Interfaith Forum as a formal engagement group would be beneficial, as faith communities have important things to say from a worldwide perspective. Key is the idea of universal human dignity. *Fratelli Tutti* is highlights the importance of this concept of common human dignity. *Laudato Si’* has been an important force, including in G20 Interfaith meetings, bringing change, and has brought environment issues to the center.

Questions posed to the panel by the audience challenged the panel to address ways to find solutions to the many problems raised. Another questioner posed a question about fatalism, an understanding of COVID-19 as a punishment of God, even a rejection of science.

**Sarah Snyder** argued that the way to address those who see disease as a punishment is to bring them into the dialogue. The assumptions and fears of some communities can best be challenged with dialogue. The more we can do that rather than to exclude or marginalize them, the better.

**Somboon (Moo) Chungprampree** responded with examples of the large scale very practical response of the Thai Supreme Patriarch of the Sanga to the COVID emergency. He ordered 42,000 Buddhist temples in Thailand to serve food from their temples to the people. Their support of public health regulations and behavior change has helped to lower the number of cases and helped to strengthen networks across countries, using existing networks. Monks are using zoom to give psychosocial support to the community, even doing chanting by zoom.

**Bishop Kukah** saw great hope in the role that Saudi Arabia is playing in hosting the G20 Interfaith Forum as well as Pope Francis engaging with the Sheikh of Al-Azhar in a common statement and call to action.

A question focused on Africa, highlighting the concern of the secondary impact of the responses to COVID, with neglect of other diseases and major social and economic consequences. The questioner highlighted the need to change economic models.

**Bishop Kukah** agreed that the COVID-19 emergency presents great struggles in many parts of our lives besides health. The other horrible pandemic is the killings by fanatics with Boko Haram. Despite wonderful rains this year, farmers are afraid to go to the fields so crops are disappointing. In short, Africa

has a basket of problems to address.

The G20 should deal practically with the money that has been stolen, returning it to Africa, and tying its use to support to vulnerable groups. The Abacha money, for example, will be returned but the country where it has been requires it be well used; this, Kukah argues, can help mitigate the crisis. There have been huge illicit flows. Other priority needs are for infrastructure and health care. Pope Francis is addressing the issues of economic models, seeking greater fairness. But Africa needs to face issues of consumption by elites, which have tastes that they cannot sustain. There is a need to focus on agriculture so that countries can feed themselves, producing what they consume. In short, a role for religious leaders is to serve as the conscience of communities.

**Dr. Tamader Al Ramah** pointed to the many minority communities which suffer and face a lack of understanding and dialogue, excluded in many ways from societies. They look for explanations of what is happening and often accept distorted ones or myths and false narratives. Religious actors and leaders have a major role to play in reaching out to these groups, so they are helped before there is a huge impact on them.

**Somboon (Moo) Chungprampree** argued that religious leaders should be the loom at the community, at national and international levels, strengthening communities that are weakened by rise of the nation state.

**Ruth Messinger** argued that “our job, faith by faith, is to have a vision of a world that is more just, with a moral tone. In religious communities we can give people a greater sense of hope.” Activism is a major role for religious communities, in every country and every faith. Better worlds do not come by themselves, and religious communities have responsibilities to advance human rights, to urge people to participate in the earthly world and to highlight practical ways to do it. The G20 should be urged to be more accountable and to work collaboratively with faith communities to this end. Fighting corruption should be an ongoing concern.

**Jonatas Machado** responded that there are no magic bullets, but he is optimistic, never in despair. This is a complex chess game, articulating the concrete moves of different pieces. Something important is happening. Having the G20 in Saudi Arabia is a tremendous step. He pointed to the need for a social market economy. There are non-economic as well as economic values, for example educational and health values, that must be practiced. It is not a choice between communism and capitalism; that is a false dichotomy. Economic models come in different shades. Social rights and values can and must be protected.

**Juan Navarro Floria**. This pandemic shows that life is fragile. Religion can put some kind of hope into the process, a sense of our purpose in this life. The COVID emergency highlights this important face of religion for us all.

**Bishop Kukah**. Given the global realities, without being insular, all communities should develop mechanisms to address their problems. The more young people pull back from seeking solutions from outside, the better.

**Canon Snyder** reminded us that religious communities are embedded in communities for long term, the bearers of hope and of long-term visions.

**Katherine Marshall**, in concluding, emphasized the important and continuing work that is involved, expressing her admiration and respect for courage and wisdom of each participant. The discussion perhaps marks the beginning of a path that comes at the beginning of a way forward that we can travel together.

**Panel Description:** *The inequalities that the COVID-19 crisis reveals demand urgent action by world leaders. Multilateral responses that G20 leaders are considering must focus squarely on vulnerable communities, assuring that resources are used to further recovery and rebuilding and take fully into account priority needs. The essential spirit of solidarity and equity that is a foundation for the G20 ethos is echoed by religious communities across the world during the crisis, both in remarkable mobilization of resources to serve communities and in interreligious action grounded in commitment to human rights and human dignity. Religious communities have distinctive capacities to identify, serve, and direct attention to areas of need. Cooperating in efforts to assure integrity and efficiency in relief measures (both debt relief and social protection programs) is a demanding but fitting role for faith communities in this time of crisis, with the ethical teachings and pragmatic experience of different religious traditions invaluable contributors to these objectives. The measures taken in the months ahead to respond to urgent, critical needs must be undertaken with a view towards the future, building effective cooperative arrangements involving multisector actors, including religious communities, that reflect commitment to addressing inequalities, directing resources towards the most vulnerable, and assuring fully transparent and robust accountability mechanisms for use of public funds.*

**Guiding questions:**

• \_Can we highlight examples of how faith communities have lived principles of solidarity during the COVID-19 crisis and what lessons emerge?

• \_What mechanisms can best assure the inclusion of religious actors in multilateral responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to prepare for future complex global emergencies?

• \_What practical mechanisms exist or can be designed to link positive values in religious teachings to the ethical imperative to focus on vulnerable communities?

• \_How can partnerships engaging religious actors and policy makers promote robust transparency accountability mechanisms specifically addressed to pandemic relief measures?

Looking to the long-term, how within the G20 framework can religious communities form part of strategies that build national integrity systems and implement anti-corruption strategies?