

World Interfaith Harmony Week 2026  
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN PLURALISTIC SOCIETIES  
Collective Responsibility in Countering Discrimination, Hate, and Intolerance  
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**Reflections By:**

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I am incredibly humbled to be on this panel with these esteemed colleagues. It's quite an opportunity. Personally, I love religion, and this is my take on the religious freedoms in pluralistic societies. So, I do live in South Africa, a democratic country where religious pluralism is very much present. We see it in everyday life, from our place of work, schools, and social surroundings.

Religious freedoms obviously go hand in hand with respect, equality, freedom of expression, and freedom of association, among other freedoms.

So, my take on this is that pluralistic societies are fundamentally. They fundamentally consist of varying viewpoints, which all need to be respected, and we need to consider everyone's viewpoints so that everyone gets a chance to feel included and respected.

But at the same time, individuals also need to ensure that their viewpoints do not discriminate and cause hate.

As much as we say that government has a duty to ensure individuals' rights are protected, we in South Africa have a constitution which protects religious freedoms and gives us other rights for religious freedom and equality, freedom of expression, and association.

But as much as the government allows for these freedoms, I think it's also more important that individuals and religious organizations or social institutions—they have a greater influence to ensure discrimination, hate, and intolerance don't result. I say this because individuals interact more socially, learn, and adapt to the individuals they interact with in religious organizations and social institutions.

So, I can speak from experience, because I am part of the Hindu Unity Forum of South Africa (HUFSA). We aim to promote the Hindu voice obviously.

People voicing their opinions and being heard is essential for human dignity, and it gives people a sense of pride, and they feel included, and more so, I guess, they feel respected. So, that's why, we at HUFSA, note concerns, and we address them where needed. We also don't condone any discrimination.

I think we can say that the voice of reason always prevails, and whenever there are issues that the Hindu community feels aggrieved by, we try to address it the best we can.

I also believe that religious institutions are probably one of the most crucial aspects to avoid discrimination, intolerance, and hate.

Religious organizations tend to breed fanatics and extremists. And these religious organizations and institutions can pacify their congregation because if they pacify their congregation and even educate their followers, then these followers will learn that they don't always have to ensure their rights by putting down another's rights. So, it's important that justice is fair, and everything is looked at holistically.

As a Hindu, my religion preaches kindness and tolerance. It's a very inclusive religion, and it encompasses a vast ideology. Beliefs and practices vary, and anyone can practice Hinduism.

So, everyone is also welcome and never ostracized. I think also when it comes to religion, education is essential. The youth and people in general always need to be educated. This will free them from ignorance, and I think they have—you know, it's always easier to accept things when you have full facts. This is why I think education is the key factor in this.

### **How can faith communities, especially youth initiatives and grassroots leadership, strengthen tolerance?**

I believe that youth involvement in shared interests and passions equips young people with vital skills such as communication, socialization, and confidence, which they carry throughout their lives.

Youth initiatives, especially within faith communities, create a safe space for young people to interact. Many faith communities engage in service projects, and when youth participate in these initiatives, they become more compassionate, learn how to interact with others respectfully, and develop leadership skills.

Humbling themselves in these roles helps empower them and makes them better individuals. They are also able to lead and uplift others when given leadership opportunities. Through these experiences, they become more aware of different situations and learn how to engage with others in a respectful and honest manner.

Grassroots leadership plays a crucial role here because it provides a platform where youth feel more comfortable identifying and interacting with community leaders. These grassroots leaders have an important responsibility to guide and teach youth about tolerance and inclusiveness across different groups.

Interfaith initiatives can help foster this environment. We already have service projects, but also activities like cleanup campaigns, community projects, and even simple social gatherings such as movie nights or game nights. These events allow youth to interact socially with their peers, both religiously and on shared interests, while being taught important values like respect.

All these initiatives equip youth with foundational values—they become better leaders, develop more empathy, and learn how to take charge in various situations. Ultimately, this contributes to building a more tolerant and cohesive society.

Thank you.