

High-Level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace

The General Assembly, in its resolution 61/221 of 20 December 2006, (OP. 14) decided “to convene in 2007 a high-level dialogue on interreligious and intercultural cooperation for the promotion of tolerance, understanding and universal respect on matters of freedom of religion or belief and cultural diversity, in coordination with other similar initiatives in this area”.

In its resolution 61/269 of 25 May 2007, the General Assembly decided to hold the High-level Dialogue 4 and 5 October 2007, including an informal interactive hearing with representatives of civil society, including representatives of non-governmental organizations and the private sector, to be chaired by the President of the General Assembly. The hearing comprised two consecutive Panel discussion focused on the following:

- Challenges of Interreligious & Intercultural Cooperation Today
- Best Practices & Strategies for Interreligious & Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward



THE PRESIDENT
OF THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

14 November 2007

Excellency,

I am pleased to enclose herewith a summary of the informal interactive hearing of the General Assembly with civil society, which was held during the High-level Dialogue of the General Assembly on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, on 4 October 2007.

The hearing provided an opportunity for Member States to engage in an open discussion with civil society, including representatives of non-governmental organizations, the private sector, academia, the media and faith-based organizations around the challenges of interreligious and intercultural cooperation today, as well as best practices and strategies moving forward. I was encouraged by the active participation and prominent attendance of Member States at the High-level Dialogue and interactive hearing, as well as by the in depth discussions and proposals that ensued.

Furthermore, I would like to inform you that a detailed account of the views and recommendations expressed by the civil society panelists and respondents, as well as an annex containing an overview of the UN's activities in the field of interreligious and intercultural cooperation, can be viewed on the website of the President of the General Assembly. A webcast of the proceedings of the High-level Dialogue, including the interactive hearing, is also available on the UN webcast site.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

Srgjan Kerim

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Srgjan Kerim', written in a cursive style.

All Permanent Representatives and
Permanent Observers to the United Nations
New York

High Level Dialogue of the General Assembly on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace

Summary of the Informal Interactive Hearing with Civil Society 4 October 2007

I. Introduction

1. The General Assembly, in its resolution 61/221 of 20 December 2006, (OP. 14) decided "to convene in 2007 a high-level dialogue on interreligious and intercultural cooperation for the promotion of tolerance, understanding and universal respect on matters of freedom of religion or belief and cultural diversity, in coordination with other similar initiatives in this area".

2. In its resolution 61/269 of 25 May 2007, the General Assembly further decided that the High-level Dialogue would be held on Thursday and Friday, 4 and 5 October 2007 at the ministerial or highest possible level, and that it would consist of three plenary meetings: one in the morning of Thursday, 4 October and two on Friday, 5 October. By the same resolution, the General Assembly also decided to hold in the afternoon of 4 October 2007 an informal interactive hearing with representatives of civil society, including representatives of non-governmental organizations and the private sector, to be chaired by the President of the General Assembly.

3. The objective of the informal interactive hearing was to provide an opportunity for Member States to engage in dialogue with experts from civil society, including non-governmental organizations and the private sector representing diverse regions, cultures and perspectives, with a view to: i) strengthening efforts to promote interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation by engaging a variety of actors and constituencies in government, civil society and the United Nations system; ii) promoting a culture of peace and dialogue among civilizations, and advancing multi-stakeholder coalitions on related issues; and iii) translating shared values into action in order to achieve sustainable peace in the 21st Century.

4. The Office of the President of the United Nations General Assembly convened a 'Task Force' of civil society representatives to help ensure the effective participation and optimal engagement of civil society, including NGOs and the private sector, in the High-level Dialogue and interactive hearing. The Task Force helped support the Office of the President of the General Assembly in matters relating to civil society's input and identified ten panelists, ten respondents and two moderators for the interactive hearing, and provided key links to relevant civil society networks and organizations globally.

5. The President of the General Assembly, H.E. Mr. Srgjan Kerim, opened the interactive hearing which was held under the overarching theme "Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace". A statement was then read on behalf of the High Representative of the Secretary-General for the Alliance of Civilizations, Mr. Jorge Sampaio. The first panel discussion focused on the theme of "Challenges of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Today" and was moderated by the Secretary General of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, Dr. William Vendley. The second panel discussion dealt with the theme of "Best Practices and Strategies of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward" and was moderated by the Permanent Representative of Kuwait to the United Nations, H.E. Mr. Abdullah Ahmed Mohamed Al-Murad.

6. A summary of the key findings that emerged from the hearing was presented by the President of the 62nd Session of the General Assembly at the closing plenary meeting of the High-level Dialogue on 8 October. In his closing statement, the President of the General Assembly congratulated all for the stimulating discussions and thanked in particular the distinguished panelists and representatives from civil society, faith groups, academia and the private sector for enriching the debate. Commending the spirit of cooperation and mutual respect that was displayed during the High-level dialogue as something the General Assembly can continually strive to exemplify, the President underlined that sincere dialogue is an extraordinary tool to promote inclusiveness. Encouraged by the large participation of Member States in the interactive hearing, the President welcomed the interest of the General Assembly to continue this meaningful interaction with civil society on this issue and others.

II. Proceedings of the interactive hearing

1. GA Resolution 61/221 adopted on 20 December 2006, provides a good overview of the necessity for increased interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace. It also acknowledges the importance of both freedom of religion and belief, as well as of respect for a diversity of religions and cultures.

2. The informal interactive hearing on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace was the fifth hearing with civil society to be convened by the General Assembly. As each hearing is a new learning process involving different stakeholders and partners, to guarantee representativity and shared ownership, the President of the General Assembly appointed a Civil Society 'Task Force' to assist in the selection of participants and in identifying the sub-themes of the hearing. Twenty speakers represented a variety of cultural (all continents) and religious (Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Jain, Baha'i) traditions. Thematically and professionally, participants brought forward a diverse spectrum of viewpoints and experiences, representing i.e. religious institutions, UN program partners, grassroots women's organizations, indigenous peoples networks, mediation and peace building groups and academic research centers.

3. The informal hearing was held in the afternoon of 4 October, following the Opening Plenary of the High Level Dialogue with two implications: The holding of the hearing during the High-level Dialogue enabled a high level of attendance of Member States. As the time that could be allotted to the hearing as part of the two-day Dialogue agenda was limited to one afternoon session of three hours, multiple delegates who asked for the floor could not be accommodated in the set time frame.

4. There was a shared sense of appreciation and achievement, with regard to both the relevance of the sub-themes and the diversity and representativity of the participants from civil society, religious communities, academia and the private sector. The discussion was very rich, bringing together a wide variety of backgrounds, experiences, cultures, religions and views.

5. All speakers recognized that interfaith and intercultural understanding form the bedrock of our well-being, stability and prosperity, and recommended practical measures to advance interreligious and intercultural cooperation, including through programmes for youth, education, media, and the promotion of rights of minorities through innovative and inclusive dialogue.

First Panel

6. The first panel discussion dealt with the 'Challenges of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Today', and opened with an analysis of how religion is used to fuel conflicts, as well as recommendations for the steps that could be undertaken to foster meaningful interreligious dialogue and respect. The first panel also highlighted successful experiences at the grassroots.

- The Representative of the L'auravetli'an Information and Education Network of Indigenous Peoples of Russia described efforts to provide information and education to twenty minority groups, and related to their advocacy work to operationalize new legislation in the field and change education curricula to value and foster indigenous culture and tradition.
- The Representative of the Union Theological Seminary emphasized that before religions can move to making positive contributions to peacebuilding, they must confront why it is that religion is such a ready tool to foster conflict and violence.
- The Representative of the International Islamic Center for Population Studies and Research at the Al Azhar University in Cairo illustrated how work in the field of women's health and reproductive rights has been furthered in the Islamic world over the past 30 years.
- The Representative of the Interfaith Mediation Centre of Nigeria stressed the power of religion which can be used to raise the consciousness of humanity or manipulated to foster violence and extremism, and recommended locally appropriate peace building training for youth and other constituencies.
- The Representative of the Anuvrat Global Organization underscored the role of economic disparities and globalization in fuelling tensions and pointed to the positive impact of non-violent approaches such as Ahimsa Yatra in India to create a positive climate for dialogue.

7. The Respondent from the Foundation for a Culture of Peace noted the role of the media and irresponsible leadership in perpetrating stereotypes that generate fear and suspicion, thereby generating the perception of a "clash of civilizations". The Respondent from the Inter Press Service International Association cautioned the role of the media in contributing to tensions by incomplete or inaccurate reporting. The Respondent from the National Peace Council of the Philippines called on leaders to promote interreligious and intercultural cooperation by honoring their commitments to achieving the Millennium Development Goals, and by adhering to the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Respondent from the Women's Ministries of the Latin American Council of Churches recommended the use of Human Rights language to address the challenges of religious traditions, notably in the context of gender equality and justice. The Respondent from Infogest, Senegal demonstrated that the world of business provides ample opportunities for peaceful, multicultural interaction and success.

8. During the interactive dialogue with Member States, Permanent Observers and the UN System that followed, it was emphasized that understanding between religions was not an end unto itself, but rather a step towards greater cohesion among diverse communities. Participants were reminded that despite a willingness to engage in forums such as these, in reality freedom of belief and religion is still not guaranteed and protected in many countries. Recommendations included: i) Encouraging support at the national level to render local action plans more successful (as proven by the experience of the Philippines in developing and introducing peacebuilding classes in all school curricula); ii) Providing a role for government and civil society to conduct "media policing work"; iii) Conducting training in intercultural sensitivity, and placing members of a given religious or ethnic community at the forefront of efforts to promote peace within that community; and iv) creating national interfaith networks to foster new experts in interfaith dialogue.

Second Panel

9. The second panel discussion addressed the theme of "Best Practices and Strategies of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward". Panelists shared their work on interfaith dialogue, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and MDG policy development, and provided examples of successful practices for wider application.

- The Representative of the Islamic College for Advanced Studies/Religions of the Sacred Heart described methods for achieving inner peace and freedom from fear, in order to transform personal and social energies towards communion, noting that "Peace is intelligence of the heart".
- The Representative of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding underscored the success of their network of interfaith mediators in armed conflict zones, whose high risk, discreet, and yet effective work can serve as a guide for policy makers working with religious leaders in areas of armed conflict.
- The Representative of the Comunidad Teologica de Honduras highlighted the importance of inclusive interreligious dialogue, such as those convened with UNFPA's assistance in Central America on population planning and women's health, and noted that this dialogue model helped to build an active interreligious network on a variety of issues, including environmental protection.
- The Representative of the Baha'i International Community in Tanzania underscored that the freedom to hold belief of one's choosing and to change it, was an essential attribute of the human conscience, and recommended concrete strategies to overcome ignorance and fanaticism.
- The Representative of Weyerhaeuser Company shared that the promotion of diversity demands a mindset geared towards collaborative leadership and offered the experience of private sector partnerships with civil society and NGOs in developing countries as a model for effective collaboration.

10. The Respondent from the Centre for Women's Studies and Intervention of Nigeria underscored the global importance of addressing women's equality, and urged men, as custodians of religious traditions, to play an active role in women's empowerment. The Respondent from the UNESCO Chair in Interfaith Studies posed the challenge of moving beyond either an exclusively secular education with little knowledge about diverse religious traditions, or, on the other hand, a religious education that advocates one religion above all others. The Respondent from the Earth Charter emphasized the promotion of global ethics as a unifying strategy in the midst of religious and cultural diversity, building on the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and offered the methodology of the Earth Charter as a useful model in this regard. The Respondent from the Peace Boat, Japan, urged all stakeholders to engage in open dialogue about wounds from the past in order to create the conditions for genuine interreligious and intercultural cooperation moving forward. The Respondent from Zenab for Women in Development, Sudan, stressed the need for the international community to implement the protection of religious minorities and support grassroots dialogue initiatives, including the training of religious and community leaders in programmes for reconciliation.

11. During the interactive dialogue with Member States, Permanent Observers, and the UN System that followed, various delegations articulated proposals for action including i) The establishment of a UN body with the specific mandate of heightening the level of interfaith dialogue, and bringing together experts on interfaith dialogue; ii) The reallocation by Member States of a portion of defense budgets, towards interfaith dialogue initiatives designed to build peace; iii) Encouraging religious communities to hold internal dialogues, in order to identify and engage the extreme elements within one's own religious tradition in support of peace; iv) The introduction of mandatory interfaith education which would foster understanding of one's own

religious traditions as well as that of others; v) Engaging the media to promote understanding rather than stereotypes and prejudice. The momentum around interreligious dialogue was noted by many participants, including the Holy See, referring to the initiatives of the late Pope John Paul II, and of Pope Benedict XVI.

III. Key findings

The following points highlight the findings and recommendations that emerged from the hearing:

(a) *Globalization* has heightened the need for greater cooperation and understanding among cultures, religions, and civilizations. Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation is a prerequisite for international peace and security.

(b) *The UN must continue to play a central role* in promoting the Culture of Peace, human rights, human security and multi-stakeholder cooperation. To that end, the UN should enhance its efforts to foster meaningful interreligious and intercultural dialogue, including through a 'Decade of Dialogue', and by developing permanent programmes or mechanisms specifically focusing on interreligious and intercultural dialogue for peace.

(c) *Non-state actors must be involved in this process.* While Member States are the UN's building blocks, non-state actors are very active and influential partners for a global alliance for peace, as they build bridges between communities. Partnerships with people working at the grassroots are of key importance to the UN. The new forms of cooperation that are emerging between the private sector and civil society could also provide new models for best practices.

(d) *Religious communities* have a unique spiritual and moral authority and should play a more prominent role in achieving international peace and developing a common language for peace. Valuable lessons can be learned from the experience gathered by interreligious organizations, humanists and other civil society groups in this area for over a century.

(e) *Indigenous and minority groups need to be included.* While the adoption of the Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples last September pays tribute to the inherent value of human diversity and to the strength of the indigenous movement globally, mechanisms to protect minority rights tend to be weak. Political will is necessary to ensure respect for the rights of indigenous peoples and other groups, including migrant workers, to land, ethnic diversity, and cultural and religious traditions. The inclusion of minority groups in intercultural dialogue should be a priority.

(f) *Examples of peaceful multicultural societies:* There are many examples of culturally and religiously diverse communities living in harmony for centuries. Lessons can be learned from these experiences, including those at the local level, as they provide important models to be applied in the current context of globalization.

(g) *Deadly conflict and freedom of religion:* The failure to reach sustainable solutions to conclude long-standing conflicts in the Middle East and Africa deeply affects interreligious understanding and cooperation. While the UN has made great progress in monitoring instances of religious repression, in many countries, freedom of religion or belief continues to be violated and actions do not go beyond vague recommendations calling on governments and religions to be more responsible and self critical.

(h) *Religious extremism and inclusive dialogue*: One of the key reasons why religions are prone to violence is that some claim to be superior over others in holding the highest of truths. Such claims tacitly allow perpetrators to use religion for violent purposes, engaging hatred and mobilizing constituencies. Solutions lie in religions working together, acknowledging the extreme elements within their own constituencies and adopting a self-critical approach towards teachings which may incite discrimination and intolerance.

(i) *Human rights*: Inclusive dialogues cannot succeed if, in the interests of "harmony", there are taboos about addressing violations of fundamental freedoms. Human Rights language and instruments have proven to be successful tools to address contentious cultural and religious traditions.

(j) *Freedom from want*: One of the primary objectives of the United Nations' collaboration with religious communities should be to relieve the suffering of people living in poverty and achieve the timely implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. The connection between human rights and poverty eradication must be recognized in order to protect human dignity.

(k) *Media*: The prominent role of the media in generating perceptions of other cultures and religions needs to be acknowledged in a world driven by communications technology, where perception tends to override reality and facts. It is important to strike a balance between freedom of expression and the responsibility of the media to exercise judgment and respect in representing cultural and religious communities.

(l) *Education*: Universal curricula on multiculturalism, interreligious cooperation and peacebuilding should be introduced in primary and secondary schools. Quality education should focus on building cohesion and common understanding in society, rather than promoting a specific religion. Successful grassroots peacebuilding and dialogue models require further study to develop innovative training approaches for youth, i.e., the Andalusia model and the Peace Boat.

(m) *Other recommendations*: Among the objectives of a United Nations body designed to promote interreligious and intercultural cooperation could be the systematic collection and dissemination of successful grassroots dialogue experiences and the development of a code of conduct based on global ethics. The approach of the Earth Charter provides an interesting example. Recognizing that peaceful relations among cultures and religions are an important security measure, governments should be encouraged to allocate part of their defense budgets to interfaith dialogue mechanisms.

**Programme for the High-level Dialogue and
Informal Interactive Hearing with Civil Society on Interreligious
and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace
4-5 October 2007**

Thursday 4 October

- 10.00 – 13.00 hrs - Opening of **the High-level Dialogue** by H.E. Dr. Srgjan Kerim, President of the 62nd Session of the General Assembly (Plenary meeting, General Assembly Hall), on the theme “*Interreligious and intercultural cooperation for the promotion of tolerance, understanding and universal respect on matters of freedom of religion or belief and cultural diversity*”
- Statement by the Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-Moon
 - Statements by Member States and Observers to the United Nations (Statements should not exceed 7 minutes)
- 15.00 – 18.00 hrs. - **Hearing with Civil Society, including NGOs and the private sector** (Trusteeship Council Chamber)
- Opening of the Hearing with Civil Society by the President of the 62nd session of the General Assembly, followed by two panel discussions
 - Remarks by Mr. Jorge Sampaio, High Representative of the Secretary-General for the Alliance of Civilizations
 - **Panel 1: Challenges of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Today**
 - Floor will be open for interaction with Member States after the panel’s presentations
 - **Panel 2: Best Practices and Strategies of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward**
 - Floor will be open for interaction with Member States after the panel’s presentations

Friday 5 October 2007

- 10.00 – 13.00 hrs - **Continuation of the High-level Dialogue**
15.00 – 18.00 hrs (Plenary meetings, General Assembly Hall)
- Closing remarks by the President of the 62nd session of the General Assembly
 - High-level Dialogue concludes

**List of speakers, respondents, invited guests and moderators at
The Informal Interactive Hearing of the General Assembly on Interreligious
and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace
Thursday 4 October 2007, 15.00 -18.00 hrs**

Panel 1: Challenges of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Today

Speakers:

- **Ms. Gulvaira Shermatova**, Director, L'auravetli'an Information & Education, Network of Indigenous Peoples, Russia
- **Prof. Paul Knitter**, Paul Tillich Professor of Theology, World Religions and Culture, Union Theological Seminary, USA
- **Prof. Gamal I. Serour**, Director, International Islamic Center for Population Studies and Research, Al Azhar Centre, Egypt
- **Dr. Sohan Lal Gandhi**, President, Anuvrat Global Organization, India
- **Mr. Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa**, Joint Executive Director, Interfaith Mediation Centre, Nigeria

Respondents:

- **Mr. Manuel Manonelles**, Director, Foundation for a Culture of Peace, Spain
- **Mr. Thalif Deen**, UN Bureau Chief, Inter Press Service International Association, Sri Lanka
- **Prof. Eliseo Mercado**, Chair, National Peace Council, Philippines
- **Rev. Judith Van Osdol**, Continental Coordinator of Women's Ministries, Latin American Council of Churches, Argentina
- **Ms. Katy Sarre**, Chief Executive Officer, INFOGEST, Senegal

Moderator

- **Dr. William Vendley**, Secretary-General, World Conference of Religions for Peace, USA

Panel 2:

Best Practices and Strategies of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward

Speakers:

- **Sr. Gerardette Philips**, Representative, Islamic College for Advanced Studies/Religious of the Sacred Heart
- **Ms. Georgette Bennett**, President and Founder, Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, USA
- **Rev. Carlos Tamez**, Representative, Comunidad Teologica de Honduras, Honduras
- **Ms. Mitra Deliri**, Representative of the Bahá'í International Community and Director of External Affairs Office of the Bahá'ís of Tanzania, Tanzania
- **Mr. Effenus Henderson**, Chief Diversity Officer, Weyerhaeuser Company, USA

Respondents:

- **Prof. Steven Rockefeller**, Co-chair, Earth Charter International, USA
- **Sr. Francisca Ngozi Uti**, Representative, Centre for Women Studies and Intervention, Nigeria
- **Dr. Josef Boehle**, Coordinator, UNESCO Chair in Interfaith Studies, University of Birmingham, UK
- **Mr. Tatsuya Yoshioka**, Director, Peace Boat, Japan
- **Ms. Fatima Ahmed**, Executive Director, Zenab for Women in Development, Sudan

Moderator:

- **H.E. Mr. Abdullah Ahmed Mohamed Al-Murad**, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Kuwait to the United Nations

Invited Guests:

- **Mr. Qamar-ul- Huda**, Scholar of Islamic Studies and Comparative Religions, Pakistan.
- **Dr. John Taylor**, Representative, International Association for Religious Freedom, Switzerland

Civil Society Task Force members:

Members of the Civil Society Task Force, whose names appear below, may also be called upon to engage in the hearing, as necessary.

- **Mr. Ari Alexander**, Co-Executive Director, Children of Abraham, USA
- **Dr. Kezevino Aram**, Director, Shanti Ashram, India
- **Mr. Erol Avdovic**, UN Correspondent, Deutsche Welle, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- **Mr. Hiro Sakurai**, UN Representative, Soka Gakkai International, and Former President, Committee of Religious NGOs, Japan

Note: Speakers and respondents have been requested to participate at the Informal Interactive Hearing in their individual capacity.

UN PRESENTATION
Paul F. Knitter, Union Theological Seminary, NY

I offer my comments in four theses:

I. UNLESS THE RELIGIONS ARE PART OF THE SOLUTION, THEY WILL CONTINUE TO BE PART OF THE PROBLEM.

I state what I believe is obvious: The religions *are* part of the problem. They are a source of conflict and violence among nations and ethnic groups. This is not to say that they are the *cause* and fundamental reason for the conflict, but they do play a determinative role in the conflict.

The religions are being used by leaders and politicians to inspire hatred of “the enemy-other,” to strengthen commitment in fighting the enemy.

To deal with this problematic role that the religions play is not the only thing that has to be done, but it is a necessary thing that has to be done.

II. THE RELIGIONS MUST BE PART OF THE SOLUTION TOGETHER, NOT SEPARATELY.

The problem we are facing is one that touches all religions, admittedly some more than others. To identify the causes of violence within one’s own religion, one needs the help of other religions *who can be critical of us in ways that we are unable to criticize ourselves*. (The causes of religious violence are like bad breath: you need other people to make you aware of it.)

Such interreligious cooperation and dialogue must take place primarily on the grassroots level. “High-level” understanding and harmony are relatively easy. The challenge and promise of dialogue are on the community level of villages and neighborhoods. Such dialogue is already going on. But it needs support.

III. TO BE PART OF THE SOLUTION RELIGIONS MUST CONFRONT WHY THEY ARE PART OF THE PROBLEM.

Before the religions can move to making positive contributions to peace-building, they must confront why it is that religion is such a ready tool to foster conflict and violence.

It is not enough – indeed, it is too facile and can serve as an excuse – simply to announce that “the extremists” are not true Christians, or true Buddhists, or true Muslims. It is not enough to say that such religious perpetrators of violence don’t belong to our community. They *are* part of our community. They claim to be. They draw their reasons, their justification for hatred and violence from the same religious texts and teachings that we use.

These texts and teachings that are being used to justify violence must be recognized and dealt with as part of the dialogue of religions.

IV. ONE OF THE KEY REASONS WHY RELIGIONS ARE SO EASILY EXPLOITED FOR PURPOSES OF HATRED AND VIOLENCE IS BECAUSE EACH RELIGION MAKES CLAIMS TO BE ‘SUPERIOR’ OVER ALL THE OTHERS.

In different ways, all (or most) religious traditions assert that they were given or have attained the “only” or the “highest” or the “final” Truth for all humankind.

Therefore, while each religion may recognize the *reality* of other religions, they don’t really recognize the permanent *validity* of other religions, for they believe that ultimately God or the Ultimate wants everyone to be a Christian or Muslim or Buddhist – or they believe that God has privileged them to stand above all others. This would be like trying to organize the United Nations around only one nation that claims to have the only or the final word on how the world should be organized!

I am not saying that claims of superiority naturally and necessarily lead to conflict and violence. (The fundamental, originating causes of religious violence are usually economic and political. They stem from either the reality or the perception of being treated unjustly or disrespectfully by others.)

But I am proposing that such claims of superiority provide “handles” or opportunities by which political or ethnic leaders can turn religion into a weapon of violence. (When one’s superior, divinely preferred religion is attacked by an inferior religion or culture, people are easily called to arms, even terrorist acts, to defend God’s preferred religion!)

The religions must offer the world a model of *an egalitarian community of communities*, in which the unique validity and value of each community, each religion, are affirmed and engaged, but no religion claims to be superior or dominant over all the others.

Only in this way can the religions truly attain a lasting peace among themselves. Only in this way can they foster peace among the nations.

High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation

Challenges of Inter-religious and Intercultural cooperation today

Gulvayra Shermatova, LIENIP

Уважаемые дамы и господа!

Я являюсь Президентом межрегиональной организации «Льыюравэтльан», объединяющей более 20 коренных народов России. Для меня большая честь открыть наш диалог по вопросам взаимодействия и сотрудничества между представителями разных культур и религий.

Путь демократических реформ, которым идет Россия, дает широкое осмысление проблемы сосуществования различных культур. На протяжении почти двух десятилетий реформ, говорить, что демократическая практика является доминирующей в российском обществе, пока рано.

Это особенно остро выражается в решении коренного вопроса, потому что по своей сути - это вопрос межнациональный и сверхнациональный, и затрагивает принципы справедливого сосуществования всех и каждого.

В России на уровне федеральной власти и субъектов федерации декларируется политика поддержки коренных народов, был принят ряд соответствующих законов и проводится в жизнь ряд позитивных мер. Права коренных народов закреплены в Конституции Российской Федерации: статья 69 гарантирует соблюдение прав коренных малочисленных народов в соответствии с общепризнанными принципами и нормами международного права и международными договорами.

Казалось бы, что принятые 3 специальных закона и Российская Конституция обязаны обеспечить права коренных народов на земли, на традиционный образ жизни, способствовать сохранению и развитию их культуры. Но сожалению, отсутствие механизмов реализации законов ограничивает их участие в социально-экономической жизни и культурной жизни общества. Программа образования выстроена как средство поддержки политического курса страны, но не культуры коренных народов. В свою очередь культура - это культ тех ценностей, на основе которых решаются основные вопросы нашей жизни, и ценности общечеловеческого масштаба. Я считаю, только на этом уровне должен проходить наш диалог сегодня.

Для того, чтобы полнее понять мою мысль, взгляните на всемирное движение коренных народов за свои права. Тот факт, что Генеральная Ассамблея признала Декларацию о правах коренных народов 13 сентября этого года, доказывает какую силу способно принять движение, осмысленное исторической важностью культуры. Ведь основой мирового подъема коренных народов явилась не общность стремления к политическому или экономическому господству, но общность ответственности за судьбу своих народов как на личном уровне, так и на уровне истории.

В период глобализации, которая для нас, коренных народов, несет отрыв от традиционных знаний, культуры, нарушение прав на традиционное природопользование, отрицание прав на землю наших предков, особая роль отводится Организации Объединенных Наций. За последние годы связи ООН с сообществом коренных народов претерпели значительные изменения. Был создан Постоянный форум по вопросам коренных народов, появился Спецдокладчик по правам человека и свободам

коренного населения, объявлено Второе Десятилетие коренных народов мира. Вместе с этим, по нашему мнению, необходимо продолжать работу по созданию механизмов прямой, непосредственной, двусторонней связи на всех уровнях между традиционными коренными общинами, такими как Советы старейшин, и агентствами ООН. Необходимо, чтобы разработка основных политических установок в отношении коренных народов, как в России, так и в мире происходила при широком участии традиционных органов руководства коренных народов, чтобы голос, тех, кто реально представляет коренные народы, был услышан.

Как коренной женщине, мне хотелось бы обратиться ко всем с вопросом - что *действительно* составляет смысл, а не внешнюю форму нашего диалога? Ведь не принадлежность к определенной этнической или религиозной группе дает понимание своей роли в мире, но индивидуальная ответственность за свой народ как дело, без которого не будет тебя ни как личности, ни как исторической единицы. Лишь такое восприятие позволяет оправдать цели, превосходящие пределы личного, цели, которые осуществляются в рамках любой культуры, и которые есть та связь, что позволяет нам говорить на разных языках об общих проблемах.

Спасибо за внимание.

INTERACTIVE HEARING WITH CIVIL SOCIETY
2007 High-level Dialogue of the UN General Assembly
on
Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and
Cooperation for Peace
(Oct. 4 and 5, 2007)

Challenges of Interreligious and
Intercultural Cooperation Today

By Dr. SOHANLAL JAIN GANDHI

A Dismal Scenario

The main aim of a religion is to enable its followers to live a good moral life based on truth and justice but when we look back and examine the role of religion during the last three millenniums of recorded human history, we are shocked to discover that instead of inspiring people to follow an ethical code of conduct and abstain from sinful acts it was instrumental in generating bloody conflicts and causing discord and disharmony in society. Our beliefs result from our social and cultural environment. No two persons think alike hence it is natural that there will be different beliefs, different languages, different dresses and different cultural, moral and social values. Diversity of beliefs and views is a natural attribute of humanity.

The situation today is extremely grim and complicated since the extremists are exploiting religious differences to further their selfish ends and fulfil their political aspirations. Economic disparities, abject poverty and unemployment are also adding fuel to the fire of religious tensions. India is facing the worst crisis of terrorism. Thousands of innocent people have lost their lives and the potential threat still exists. It is time we took immediate steps to strengthen interreligious and intercultural cooperation. We are of the view that only a meaningful dialogue among religious heads can create an environment of goodwill and friendship leading to cooperation.

Main Actors of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation : What it Means to be a Main Actor

There are many actors of interreligious and intercultural cooperation and each 'actor' is making its own contribution today. They include civil society organizations as well as government and UN agencies. They are trying to reconcile divergent ethnic, cultural and religious groups by persuading them to sit together at a table and resolve their conflicts nonviolently. In almost all major religious traditions there are interreligious committees which are active in this direction. At UN and government level too there is a realization that they can work more effectively if civil society is involved. By a main actor I mean an organization which is exclusively dedicated to the cause of interfaith harmony. It studies the problem without any prejudice and bias, collects data and documentary proofs to establish its point and has deep commitment to the cause of religious reconciliation and rejects the theory that the clash between civilizations is inevitable.

I will designate civil society as the 'main actor' of interreligious and intercultural cooperation. There are many civil society organizations which are creating an environment of reconciliation and many joint action plans are being implemented which include poverty elimination projects, employment generation schemes and development of such villages as are steeped in poverty and illiteracy. These actors have been organizing highly successful global interfaith assemblies and thousands have come forward to join the global campaigns.

When the followers of different faiths – Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Jains, Christians, Sikhs sit together in fellowship as people, they find they have so much in common. Hindus are not Hinduism, Christians are not Christianity, Jains are not Jainism and Muslims are not Islam. Our beliefs and doctrines will bind us in all kinds of knots – they can become a dreadful tyranny to us so that we look at people through 'doctrinally trained eyes' and we arrogantly think that we have the right to pronounce quick judgements on them. But Buddha, Jesus, Mahavira, Mohammad, Sankara never did this. Would that we could all follow the spirit of the messages of our spiritual teachers. Our doctrines and beliefs as Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Jains are very different. They are bound to be because they have developed in different cultures. When Christians, Jains, Hindus, Muslims meet together in faith all the superficial differences quickly fall away and they become one in universal love. There is a difference between faith and belief. Faith is one but beliefs are many. There is no denying the fact that a growing sense of

alienation between major religions is creating an environment of mutual distrust and hatred but it is also true that some groups within these religions are in the forefront of interreligious dialogues and are endeavouring sincerely to create harmony.

It is the duty of the actors of interreligious and intercultural cooperation to create awareness among the followers of different faiths that *dharma* is one and is shorn of labels. All religions emphasize purity of means and ends. We must respect diversity of views and follow the path of righteousness and humanism.

Current Modalities of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation

Humanity is beset with a plethora of problems today. Globalization has robbed the marginalized groups of society of their means of survival. The incidents of religious intolerance are on the increase. Fanaticism and terrorism are raising their ugly heads. Environmental degradation and global climate change may hasten the extermination of all life forms from the face of this globe.

A culture of violence and hatred is spreading fast across the world. We cannot do anything to arrest this trend without the support and cooperation of all religious groups. It has, therefore, become essential for all of us to deepen and strengthen our interreligious cooperation and realize that violence is not the solution. The current modalities of their cooperation include dialogues to dispel misunderstandings that alienate one religious group from the other, establishment of interfaith councils and participation in each others religious festivals. We have to make it clear that by sharing our religious life and thoughts together our faith is not threatened or shaken. It is enriched and the bonds of love and fellowship between us become stronger and firmer.

Globalization is causing the mass emigration of people from one country to the other country and from one region to the other region. It is obvious that when people flock to a particular region in search of jobs and livelihood, they face violent protests from the natives who fear loss of their meagre resources or may be asked to share them with others. As a result these conflicts soon change into communal or caste-oriented conflicts. When a group of a region migrates, it brings with it different food habits, dresses and religious and cultural festivals which sometimes local people do not approve. The actors of interreligious cooperation thus face a serious challenge on account of regional differences and mingling of culturally and religiously diverse groups.

Most Pressing Current Issues and Barriers to Interfaith Harmony : A Jain perspective

The main issue before humanity today is whether we can co-exist despite diversity of beliefs, languages and cultural values : whether we can live as friends rather than as enemies notwithstanding different traditions we might follow. I believe in the unity of humanity and as a Jain my answer is that it is possible. Diversity, as a matter of fact, is the beauty of the universe. If a person thinks that only one belief should prevail on this globe, he is obviously living in an illusion. Just as it is impossible to expect only one shop of cloth in a city so it is impossible to have just one religion in the world. I believe that the principle of nonviolence can become a strong basis of interreligious and intercultural cooperation.

Lord Mahavira – the twentyfourth Tirthankara of the nonviolent Jain Tradition who lived 2500 years ago and was a contemporary of Lord Buddha said that ahimsa (nonviolence) is the basis of our survival. He explained, *“The Arhats (venerable perfect souls) of the past, those of the present and the future narrate, discourse, proclaim and assert that one should not injure, subjugate, enslave, torture or kill any animal, living being, organism or sentient being. The doctrine of ahimsa is immaculate, immutable and eternal.”* He further said, *“Those who resort to and remain engrossed in violence suffer (the miseries of) transmigration again and again.”*

In Acarang Sutra ahimsa has been proclaimed in the following words : *Injurious activities inspired by self-interest lead to evil and darkness. This is what is called bondage, delusion, death, and hell. To do harm to others is to do harm to oneself. Thou art he whom thou intendest to kill ! Thou art he whom thou intendest to tyrannize over !”*

The main cause of religious tension that prevails today is the attempts by some misguided religious groups belonging to all major religions to lure the follower of the other religions into becoming the members of their religions and thus increase the number of their followers. Lord Mahavira opposed it and proclaimed that it was against the spirit of true religion. He said, *“Many followers of different sects assert that liberation is possible only through their spiritual practices and modes of worship. If the head of a particular sect says, ‘come and join my sect else you will not be liberated’, such person creates misunderstanding by regarding the partial truth as the whole truth and thus generates animosity.”*

According to Lord Mahavira such exclusive views are the greatest hindrances and barriers to interfaith harmony. In order to create a feeling of friendship and reconciliation towards other sects Lord Mahavira propounded the philosophy of Anekant which means that truth is many-sided. Only God or omniscient being knows the whole truth. Everyone may be right from his standpoint and wrong from the other's standpoint. There is no need to quarrel. There is no viewpoint that is perfect as there is no science that is complete. Anekant approach or the non-absolutist attitude alone can remove these barriers from the path of interreligious and intercultural cooperation. It stands for complete freedom of thought and forbids the disparagement or contradiction of other religious beliefs.

Elucidating the philosophy of Anekant Acharya Mahapragya, the eminent Jain thinker says that *anekant* is the third eye. Ahimsa (nonviolence) is not possible without non-absolutist attitude and non-absolutist attitude is not possible without ahimsa (nonviolence). In the present circumstances Anekant can become a universally acceptable principle for interreligious and intercultural cooperation.

Acharya Mahapragya has imparted a new dimension to interfaith unity by embarking on Ahimsa Yatra. As the Ahimsa Yatra passes through villages, cities and towns, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains and common people join his nonviolent march and extend support to him. In the course of his *yatra* the Acharya not only heals the wounds of the people affected by violence but also imparts training in nonviolence to children, youths and even elderly people of that area so that we have highly committed nonviolence volunteers to prevent the occurrence of violent incidents in the future.

Ahimsa Yatra has two immediate objectives i.e. elimination of hunger and poverty and interfaith harmony. Like many other Jain Acharyas Acharya Mahapragya is continuing Mahavira's legacy of *ahimsa* and *anekant* which I find as most helpful in promoting interreligious and intercultural cooperation for peace. His *yatra* has generated a new wave of enthusiasm for interreligious cooperation. Violence continues unabated in the third millennium and the planet is being dragged deeper into the mire of terrorism, ethnic and religious hatred, tension and war. One distressing trend is that while forces of violence are united and organized, forces of peace and nonviolence are in a state of disarray. It is difficult to face the challenge of violence without their united struggle. In order to unify forces of peace and nonviolence, Acharya Mahapragya has established Ahimsa Samvaay – a common platform for all ahimsa lovers for a joint nonviolent crusade against violence. Another actor of interreligious and intercultural cooperation flourishing under the dynamic leadership of Acharya Mahapragya is Anuvrat Movement. It was launched in

1949 by late His Holiness Acharya Tulsi to inspire people to live the good life and thus contribute to social excellence. It has virtually become a common platform for interfaith dialogue and interfaith unity.

This statement from Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, a celebrated philosopher and former President of India further strengthens the Jain view. At the end of his admirable study 'Recovery of Faith', he wrote :

“In every religion today we have small minorities who see beyond the horizons of their particular faith, who believe that religious fellowship is possible, not through the imposition of any one way on the whole world but through an all-inclusive recognition that we are all searchers for the truth, pilgrims on the road, that we all aim at the same ethical and spiritual standards. Those who thirst for a first-hand experience are prophets of the religion of spirit, which is independent of all ecclesiastical organizations and the subtleties engendered by human learning, which looks for the formation of an earthly community governed by love. The widespread existence of this state of mind is hope of the future.”

Relationship Between Culture and Religion

Culture and religion are interwoven. Religion is, however, a personal ethic and is meant to exert moral influence on individuals so that they may desist from the path of evil. With the passage of time diverse ritualistic practices, customs, festivals also come into vogue. Each region has its own cultural practices and it is not necessary that they are part of a religion. The mountains, rivers, forests, temples, churches, mosques and Gurudvaras are symbols of culture. A hill at once becomes a sacred place just because a great spiritual leader spent his time here. Many hills in Bihar (India) are associated with the liberation of Tirthankars.

On account of a historical context a particular place of region acquires specific significance. A *dargah* (a place of *samadhi* of a *muslim fakir*) becomes a shrine and both Hindus and Muslims come and offer their prayers here. Similarly there are many places associated with the Hindu saints and Muslims also respect them. Culture is more encompassing and is an identity of a regional group whereas religion is sustained by the faith of people. Indian cultural heritage consists in not only the practices associated with the Hindus but also those of Muslims. It is difficult to distinguish between religion and culture. Culture can be defined as a way of life of a particular society or group of people including patterns of thought, beliefs, behaviours, customs, traditions, rituals, dress and language, as well as art, music and literature – surviving objects or artifacts. The noted historian Arnold

Joyanbee wrote that many flourishing civilizations vanished on account of the decadence in moral and spiritual values. Whereas a religion might be followed by people in many countries a culture may belong to a region only, of course social practices such as marriages, death and birth rituals may vary from region to region. What is important is that we look at divergent cultural values with respect and admiration. In our country we find that religion doesn't obstruct social relationships and Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and Jains participate in each other's social functions. Many Hindus invite muslim brothers to Iftkar parties during Ramjan,

Conclusion

Though the actors of interreligious and intercultural cooperation face formidable challenges, they are working hard for social harmony. An environment of friendship and goodwill needs to be created. The aim of religion is to unite people and not divide them. It should be used as an instrument for social excellence and harmony but the religion that we see today is its perverted form.

Saddened and disillusioned by what was happening in UK in the name of religion the noted Irish satirist Jonathan Swift once wrote, "*We have just enough religion to make us hate but not enough to make us love one another.*" When we look at the world today we realize that what he had uttered about the Irish society in the 18th century is true in respect of the whole world today. Unless religion becomes a binding force and religious leaders realize that they must sit together and evolve a global ethic to which all religious sects adhere scrupulously, our hope for interreligious cooperation will remain a distant dream.

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Comments of Respondent

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4 October 2007

Interactive Hearing of the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace of the United Nations General Assembly

Excellencies, dear Colleagues,

A good and balanced education has been frequently mentioned as being a key factor to overcome religious prejudices and stereotypes of the 'Others', of all those who hold different world-views or beliefs.

The great challenge today is how to move beyond an either exclusively secular education with little sensitivity and knowledge about diverse religious traditions, or, on the other hand, a religious education that only advocates one particular religion over and above all other religions.

In many countries religious education includes some reference to the plurality of religions, however often in a biased way. Some countries do not even allow the teaching of other religions. Clearly, there are deep and often unresolved challenges ahead of us all.

What could the ways forward be? Let me mention some brief points:

- Governments need to ensure an objective, balanced and well informed education, respecting the inalienable rights of each of their citizens.
- Religious leaders should be encouraged by all concerned to seek encounters and dialogue with those from other traditions.
- UNESCO has a special role to play, being the lead agency to address Educational, Cultural and Scientific issues within the United Nations System

- The UNESCO Chairs, based at many universities in all regions of the world, each offering a specific expertise rooted in their local contexts, informed by their research focus and by contacts with other universities and networks, need to be strengthened and better resourced. I would like to call on governments, UN agencies and foundations to support the existing Chairs, invite them to conferences, consultations and into education programmes. The UNESCO Chair in Interfaith Studies based at the University of Birmingham is one of these Chairs. Some UNESCO Chairs have also formed a UNITWIN Network on Inter-religious Dialogue for Intercultural Understanding that currently includes 16 Chairs at universities around the world.
- Many international interreligious organisations have been developed over the past century. In addition, the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace at the UN, and many other similarly committed initiatives and organisations are already in existence. It is up to the UN and all of us who are attending this High-level Dialogue to make the best of these existing resources, helping to coordinate and strengthen their work for more understanding amongst diverse human beings. This is a high and noble call to all of us, a call for more understanding and peace. What could be more urgent, what could be more valuable?

Let us follow up the noble intentions stated in this High-level Dialogue concretely in our lives and those who can afford it could allocate substantial resources for the kind of initiatives and programmes mentioned today.

Thank you very much for your attention.

CHALLENGES OF INTERRELIGIOUS AND INTER CULTURAL COOPERATION TODAY

A PAPER PRESENTED

BY

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At

**Interactive Hearing of the General Assembly on High Level
Interreligious and Inter cultural understanding and
cooperation for peace**

Venue: United Nations General Assembly, New York, USA

Date: 4th – 5th October, 2007

INTRODUCTION:

In the name of Almighty Allah (SWT) who created the universe in a cultural pluralism, that trigger the quest for cultural universalism, which manifestation we witnessed today in this historic occasion at the United Nations Interactive hearing with civil society.

The topic of discussion: The challenge of Interreligious and intercultural cooperation today, is highly desirable when one observes how religion and cultural identity are being misused to perpetrate the most inhuman act in the 21st century. Atrocities committed in the name of God Almighty from the Middle East to Indonesia, from former USSR to America. Whereas, under the guise of protecting cultural identity from Africa to Eastern Europe, from Latin America to Asia, the level of Barbaric act and genocides are incredible. However, religion and culture are not evil as a tool or instrument of creating changes; it is the incapable and over zealous conductors who turn it negative.

Metaphorically, United Nations is like a mother in charge of the household. She has her children, some are upright, some wayward and others are indifferent. Today, United Nations is our mother, the universe is the household and her children are human being. The recognition of positive values within our religious and cultural norms is

what makes her unique and greater than our late grand mother i.e League of Nations.

Indeed most of the earlier civilization left their mark on time as a result of the positive norms and values from our religion and culture that serve as a sustaining factor from generation to generation.

Your Excellencies, Distinguish Participants, the United Nations role of facilitating this process of understanding the culture of peace and cooperation between this earlier instrument of societal change and orientation that is as old as mankind need an applause and encouragement from fellow citizens of the world. The general Assembly resolution A/61/221 and A/RES/61/221 is the most desirable tool in this century to checkmate Huntington theory of clash of civilization which seems to be marching toward reality. The need for us as citizens of the world to identify the culture of peace to suppress the culture of war, the culture of cooperation to obliterate the culture of disintegration, the culture of justice to suppress the culture of injustice, the culture of love to replace the culture of hate, the culture of compassion to displace the culture of greed, the culture of dialogue to replace the culture of debate, and the culture of acceptance to replace the culture of intolerance within our Interreligious and intercultural wealth of experience and traditions, and consequently, evolve a culture of universalism, acceptable to all citizens of the world across the hierarchy of human family, from the diplomatic circles to the grass root level.

RELATION BETWEEN CULTURE AND RELIGION:

Brief definition put religion as "a set of belief concerning the cause, nature and purpose of the universe...and often containing moral code governing the conduct of Human affairs" (Webster's new universal unabridged dictionary 2001). The same dictionary defines culture as "quality in a person or society that arise from a concern for what is regarded as excellent in arts, letters, manners; scholarly pursuit.... It is the sum total ways of living built up by a group of Human being and transmitted from one generation to another... it is the unique behaviour and beliefs characteristics of a particular social, ethnic or age group." (Ibid)

There is a corollary between religion and culture. Religion has a great influence on the making of Human cultures across various continents and by implication on our world views and interpretation of events in the universe. Hence, the Muslim slogan that religion: Al-Islam is a culture and a way of life. Religion is the sustaining factor for the

foundation of most of our earlier cultures and civilizations. Although, some cultures are also influenced by ethnocentric and historical context. However, religion has been used, misused and abused at different levels of human history. It is like the two edges of a sword or like nuclear energy that can be used positively as well as negatively. A Jewish Rabbi once said, "Religion is like a flame, it can be used to warm the house and also burn the house". If used negatively, it is more dangerous than tsunami and Katrina disasters, consequently, much more dreadful than atomic and nuclear bombs. It goes beyond physical to metaphysical, it addresses the psychological and spiritual needs. It is the most effective tool that relates with the inner-voice in between the deep inner heart of mankind. It is imperative to study this phenomenon and how it addresses the mystery of our universe with regard to its evolving moral code governing the conduct of human affairs, and its proposed solution to the evolving culture of war threatening our universe.

CHALLENGES HINDERING BETTER UNDERSTANDING AND COOPERATION:

The challenges hindering inter religious and inter cultural understanding and cooperation for peace are enormous, some of them are as follows:

- Misinterpretation of scriptural texts that seems to promote hate, crime, racism, violence and war by incapable and overzealous scholars which breed intolerance, extremism and terrorism.
- Fear of losing cultural and religious identities from globalization threat, marginalization by dominant cultures.
- Fear of the unknown that breeds phobia, stereotype, prejudice and exclusiveness.
- Asceticism and renunciation of the world which breed withdrawal from civic responsibilities; the fear of the threat of secularism and excessive materialism.
- Challenges of proselytization: Conversion drive and self centeredness, demonization of the others and unhealthy competition.
- Ignorance and lack of knowledge about the other's faith and cultures; egocentrism, fanaticism, political exploitation.
- Poverty which breeds low self esteem, hatred, enmity, greed and manipulation of religious values.
- Lack of effective responsiveness of the United Nations Agencies and major stakeholders to crisis; which breeds perceived

injustice, exclusivism, justification and glorification of violence and war.

- Concept of secularism: Its understanding and interpretation between secularist and theocrats, lack of clear definition between the two extreme camps.
- Fear of insincerity of purpose, threat of religious unification and hidden agenda phenomenon.
- Domesticating the United Nations instruments on freedom of belief and practices. And translate identified shared values at grass root level.
- The film industries and the media insensitivity to religious and cultural values in reporting and documenting of events.

Addressing aforementioned challenges is the gateway and panacea to interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation toward universal peace and improved security.

MAIN ACTORS:

A main actor here refer to the moving spirit, the motivating and sustaining factors as far as inter religious and inter cultural understanding and cooperation toward peace is concerned include:

- Religious Leaders
- Faith based academic institutions
- Faith based NGOs
- World Conference of Religions and Peace
- Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, NYC
- Interfaith Council, United Kingdom
- Initiative of change, Switzerland
- Third Matters Diversity, Austria
- Governments which include the Judiciary, the Policy makers and the Politicians.
- United Nations Agencies which include UNFPA, UNICEF, UNESCO and the tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace.

CURRENT MODALITIES OF INTERRELIGIOUS AND INTERCULTURAL COOPERATION:

There are different modules that evolve out of different interventions in peace building across the global society. Our Centre, the Interfaith Mediation Center Kaduna - Nigeria has developed 16 different modules.

- **ALEXANDRIA PEACE DECLARATION OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS.** The Alexandria Declaration that comes out of initiative of religious leaders' effort in the Middle East by the Palestine, Israel and Egypt. Muslim, Christian and Jewish

religious leadership at Alexandria toward complimenting peace in the Middle East did not give the desired result, but in Nigeria it does give an outstanding result when implemented in Kaduna and Plateau States of Nigeria in a crisis that led to genocides.

- **THE INTERRELIGIOUS COUNCIL FOR LIBERIA AND SIERRA LEONE:** The module create a platform for joint action by religious leaders across the nation that serve as icebreaker and untie the bottle neck in Liberia and Sierra Leone first democratic elections after the war; this supplement the United Nations Agencies and ECOWAS regional organs in consolidating the fragile democratic process in the two neighboring countries. The same goes to Saint Egidio intervention in Mozambique.
- **THE PEACE MAKERS IN ACTION:** This initiative of the Tanenbaum Centre for Interreligious understanding is another initiative in the right direction religiously building bridges among religious and across cultural communities. The goal is to identify religious leaders who at the risk of their life were able to engage others in peace making from USA to Africa; from Afghanistan to Europe and from Middle East to America, the Tanenbaum Centre honored them as Peace makers. Globalization is also like edges of the sword, it has positive impact in the transfer of peacemaking modules across the world and that improve networking among faith based peace practitioners and academicians.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES:

The global south that comprises developing and under developed nation is endowed with religious and cultural heritage that influence their worldview but high level of poverty and the fear of losing cultural identity has create more challenges; whereas the global north which comprises Europe and America high level of materialism and technological advancement but lack prevalent of interreligious and intercultural influence in social discourse.

GREATEST BARRIERS TO INTERRELIGIOUS AND INTERCULTURAL COOPERATION TODAY:

The greatest barriers to successful interreligious and intercultural cooperation are the challenges earlier enumerated. However, the most pressing barriers facing the main actors include;

- Handling misinterpretation of scriptural texts that seems to promote hate, exclusiveness, violence, and war.

- Handling media and film industries disregard for the sensitivity of religious and cultural traditions.
- Double standard of policy makers and enactment of laws and policies that triggered religious motivated conflicts.
- Pre-emptive judgment and insincerity of purpose during the dialogue.
- Extensive demonization of the others and lack of fair / neutral playing ground.
- Lack of IEC materials on the culture of universalism, i.e. a shared common value across the global society.
- Drawing a line between freedom fighters and a terrorist. And between a martyr and a suicide bomber.

WAY FORWARD:

- The need to identify religiously motivated role models, that have created a new hope for the hopeless in our universe using their religious and cultural values: Mahatma Gandhi, Hinduism- satyagraha- culture of non violence- India, Sheikh AbdulGhaffar Khan, Islam- Sulhu- a theology of reconciliation- Indo Bangladesh, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Christianity- non violence civil right activist. This is just to mention but few who have excelled using inter religious and inter cultural tools for cooperation and peace in our world.
- The need for research and documentation of best practices and tools of interreligious and intercultural cooperation.
- United Nations should establish an organ that promotes the culture of peace and pluralism within the context of interreligious and intercultural norms and values at intercontinental and regional levels.
- Strategic interventions should be intensified by United Nations relevant agencies to eliminate poverty and ignorance which are like a cancer in human flesh.
- The main actors and potential actors be engaged in capacity building to enhance the culture of mutual respect for the values and traditions of the others.
- The United Nations University to establish a special faculty on interfaith and intercultural peace making program. And also an award winning prizes for promoting religious motivated individuals who risk their life for promoting and building peace across the global society.
- The United Nations need to encourage sincere dialogue across the conflict prone zones. Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said; "we inherit an immoral universe...stability do not come at the

barrel of the gun with adversary but it come out of sincere dialogue and negotiations."

CONCLUSION:

As long as man can not find peace with Almighty God; Mankind can not have peace within self. And so long as mankind has no peace within self, his neighbour and environment can not witness peace and tranquility.

Major global religions promote the concept of universalism especially Islam. It echoes universal brotherhood of all mankind thus: "O mankind We created you from a single (pair) of a male and female. And made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you despise one another) verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is he who is the most righteous of you" Qur'an 49;13

The prophet of Islam Muhammad PBUH summarized the aforementioned narrative during his farewell message thus; "O people as this month and this city is sacred so is the life of each and everyone ... An Arab is not superior over the white, neither is the white over the black, you are all from Adam and Adam is from dust..." (Hadith)

Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu (South Africa) once said: "We are bond by the bondage of life, and only together can we be safe, for without forgiveness there is no future." Our future lies in our hand, and in identifying those core values that humanized instead of dehumanized others. A 1971 noble prize winner Alexander Schezhenistyn once said: "One word of truth outweigh the world" Your Excellencies, Distinguish Participants, "Almighty God has a plan for this world and each one of us must find our part" reechoed my friend, Peter Everington of Initiative of Change (UK). We all need to realize that no one single module of solution can serve the whole universe due to the difference in our beliefs, cultures, traditions, history and experiences that influence the interpretation of our world view. Therefore, the quest for culture of universalism that will facilitate a space for mutual respect of everyone as citizen of the world is highly desirable.

I wish to conclude with my prophetic prayers thus: " Oh Allah, show us the truth and nothing but the truth and give us the courage to follow the truth; And show us falsehood and nothing but falsehood and give us the courage to abstain from following the path of falsehood, amin.

HIGH LEVEL DIALOGUE ON INTERRELIGIOUS AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE FOR PEACE

UN 62nd General Assembly, UN New York 4-5 October 2007
Interactive Hearings, 4th October - Trusteeship Council Chamber
1st Panel: Challenges for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue

MAIN POINTS¹ by Manuel Manonelles Director Foundation for a Culture of Peace

¹ These are the main points of the intervention of Mr. Manuel Manonelles as respondent, scheduled as a two minutes intervention.

Thank you moderator, I would like to make a couple of complementary contributions to what it has been said this morning in the General Assembly plenary and what it has been said this afternoon at this hearings.

a) -IN TERMS OF CHALLENGES: PERCEPTIONS *versus* REALITIES:

In today's interconnected global society, that some define as a *screen-driven society* (driven by the screens of our TVs, our computers, cell phones of 2nd and 3rd generation, etc.) some times the importance of perceptions become even more significant than the actual realities. What defines the policies, what creates the feeling of a *clash of civilizations* -which, if it would exist I would define much better as a *clash of ignorances and misunderstandings*- is more a general perception of such a problem than the problem itself, exacerbated by a media machinery -and some irresponsible leadership- which keeps repeating -in many cases without specific intentions- stereotypes, misperceptions and misleading language that, instead of giving a transparent information of reality, do create even more fear and suspicion.

Therefore, one of the main challenges of today when trying to find modalities by which ensure successful actions and policies in the field of interreligious and intercultural dialogue is to ensure a double-track work, two tracks that, although being interlinked and complementary, are of complete different nature:

-On the one side, the track which deals with the real problems and realities (that have been already addressed enough in the debate)

-On the other side, the other track that deals with the perceptions, the stories and the narratives that help to create, in one way or another, the atmosphere in which we live today. In this sense, I would underline two key areas of work:

-The *role of media* (as recognised by the Alliance of Civilizations Report² and the UNGA Resolution 61/221)

-Education, and especially *media-literacy* and *religious and culture education*³

But also what it is related to the issue of language and leadership, as recognised in the Alliance of Civilizations report⁴.

b) -IN TERMS OF MAJOR ACTORS: SOME IMPLEMENTING ACTORS

There is almost no need to say the key and leading role the whole UN system has been playing in the promotion of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (the Dialogue Among Civilizations process started in 1998-2001, the Alliance of Civilization process, the UNGA Resolution 61/221, this High Level Debate and the previous one on *Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace: obstacles and opportunities*⁵, all the work done by agencies such as UNESCO, etc.).

It is also self-evident the key role that religious leadership plays in this field, and as it has been already mentioned, there are already many initiatives taking place in this field at the high level.

Nevertheless, as it is stated in the *Concept Paper* for this session, there is a widespread feeling that these “high-level activities”, on the other hand so necessary, do not have the necessary impact into the grass-roots reality.

Therefore, in order to ensure a real and permeable impact it is essential to involve -a part, of course, of all specialised UN agencies, national governments, etc- those kind of actors which are closer to the daily reality of the citizen and that even sometimes they are already working

² *Alliance of Civilizations. Report of the High-Level Group. 13 November 2006.* See: www.unaoc.org. Specially paragraphs 6.24 to 6.27

³ Op. cit. 2: Paragraph 6.7 and 6.8

⁴ Op. cit. 2: Paragraph 5.16

⁵ Held during the 61st UNGA.

in these areas (either because they have identified them as a priority, or simply because they just react to the problems they face). That is why Regional and local authorities (especially), and civil society organisations, are already working for many years and very strongly in this field. In many municipalities and counties or provinces several interesting initiatives can be found in terms of intercultural and interreligious management and exchange, and even on intercultural and interreligious conflict management at the micro and grassroots levels.

Here again, it would be of extreme interest if we could promote another double track work:

-On the one side, in combination with the abovementioned issue of perceptions, media and education, continue developing high level initiatives involving religious, civic and political leadership. These are necessary and key to give visibility, to set standards, etc.

-On the other side, day-to-day experience, and here the regional and local authorities, together with civil society organizations that work with them, could be of a tremendous help.

Thank you.

* * *

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The UN General Assembly on Interreligious Dialogue and Intercultural Cooperation for Peace

By Eliseo Mercado, OMI
Professor – Notre Dame University, Philippines

As a response to the speakers of the first session, but more specifically to Prof. Paul Knitter, I re-affirm their observations, recommendations and comments. I reiterate that impact of globalization that has brought about three important realities that confront all peoples of living faiths and traditions. These are the following:

First is the movement of peoples across borders and frontiers. Today, there is a diversity of faith communities (migrants, overseas workers or simply temporary visitors) within the traditionally “mono-culture” and “mono-faith community”. The differing government responses to this new phenomenon range from outright repression of these, de facto, faith communities within the countries’ traditional borders, often, with the use of religious police, or something similar to respect and recognition within the spirit of a “host-guest” paradigm of inter-faith relations, specifically incumbent upon host government and host faith communities.

The cases of repression and religious discrimination in countries that give lip service to human rights as contained in the UN Declaration of Human Rights is a travesty not only of their commitments proclaimed in world forum such as this but also of their belief in a living God who is Mercy and Compassion. Their actual praxis denies what they profess in public.

The imperative of interreligious dialogue and intercultural cooperation remain formidable challenges to each member-state (religious, secular or otherwise) of the UN. There is an urgent task to show the way not only of respect and recognition of the basic human rights of every individuals to belief and the praxis of that belief, but also to promote dialogue and partnership between and among peoples of living faith.

The second phenomenon is the fact that religious extremism, particularly, the violent and repressive forms, are NO longer confined to one geographical area but are now global. They threaten the unity and peaceful fellowship that the UN community continues to weave from our multi-colored and multi-faith strands that make humankind. There are quarters and strands within our own faith communities and within and without our borders that continue to look at other faith communities as enemies and work of Satan, notwithstanding the positive command to love and respect the differences among us and within our faith traditions. The tragic fact that there are in our midst, people who kill and destroy in the name of God and religion is a continuing menace to humanity and global and national peace. Echoing the call of the late, Pope John Paul II in his address during his visit at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus:

“It is my ardent hope that Muslim and Christian religious leaders and teachers will present our two great religious communities as **COMMUNITIES IN RESPECTFUL DIALOGUE, NEVER MORE AS COMMUNITIES IN CONFLICT**”. It is crucial for

the young to be taught the ways of respect and understanding, so that they will not be led to misuse religion itself to promote or justify hatred and violence. Violence destroys the image of the Creator in his creatures, and should never be considered as the fruit of religious conviction.” (JP II Address on May 6, 2001 in Damascus, Syria)

Each member state of the UN needs to show genuine political will (incumbent upon the national leadership and all religious leaders) to take the LEAD not simply in the promotion of a true spirit of respectful dialogue among communities of living faiths but also in confronting the issues of religious extremism and fanaticism within their borders and respective faith communities. Religious extremism and fanaticism that kills and destroys is NOT a monopoly of one single faith tradition. They are present, and our deafening silence simply contributes to the growth of this new menace to humankind and peace.

The third is the call to solidarity and partnership among our faith communities and traditions in building/constructing a more human society both on the global and the national levels. Religions shape civilizations as noted by Prof. Samuel Huntington, but we do not agree with him that differences in civilizations would eventually lead to the clash of civilizations. While religions and their leaders, at times, do become instruments of war and conflicts, we, also believe, that they are bridges of cooperation and dialogue. While the slogan “clash of civilizations” has become a common currency in the period of the so-called war on terror, let us, together, rally behind the mantra that proclaims “Dialogue of Civilizations” and “Intercultural Cooperation”.

What better milieu to realize interreligious dialogue and intercultural cooperation than honor our commitments to the 8 MDGs and Monterey consensus on the Financing for Development. I believe that political leaders and religious leaders need to get their acts together behind the call for interreligious dialogue and intercultural cooperation in building a new world that is more peaceful equitable and just humankind. Thank you.

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4 October 2007

2007 High-level Dialogue of the General Assembly on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace

**The Informal Interactive Hearing of the General Assembly
Thursday 4 October 2007, 15.00 -18.00 hrs**

Best Practices and Strategies for Interreligious and Intercultural Co-operation: Going Forward

*Sr. Gerardette Philips, RSCJ
Islamic College for Advanced Studies/
Religious of the Sacred Heart*

Thank you for inviting me to the UN, a place that keeps finding ways to bring peace. It is indeed a blessing for me to be here at this assembly. We are in the Holy Month of Ramadhan and it takes me back to the many encounters I have had during this month when I have enjoyed being in communion with my Muslim brothers and sisters in the fasting and praying. Among the many special moments I have had, I share with you just one only because it shows us how our hearts long for peace. **Peace is intelligence of the heart.**

It was in the year 1995 when a 12 year old Christian boy in Pakistan was to be sentenced to death for scribbling graffiti on the walls of a Mosque. The night this was to take place, the University in Delhi where I was studying invited the staff and students for the evening prayer and the breaking of the fast. I was invited too as they knew that I was fasting. The women prayed for the 12 year old to be freed and given back to his mother. The next day, before dawn I was asked by some students to give them quotations from the Bible which spoke of forgiveness, compassion and peace. When I reached the University, I saw verses from the Quran and Bible pasted on the walls and bulletin boards of the university with the notice that the boy in Pakistan was freed! The women in Delhi had the faith and knew that their deep prayer had the power to free a child in Pakistan. But they did not know that they brought the essence of two world religions together.

Their attention to the pain around them and their intention in prayer was manifested in freedom. As women they knew the meaning of giving birth and the rights that go with the birth of every individual - a violence-free society, disease-free body, quiver-free breath, inhibition-free intellect and a trauma-free memory. The important thing that I have learnt is that the seemingly unimportant things make something important.

Interreligious and intercultural cooperation is important for us to look at today because unfortunately this is something that is missing in our world. We are aware of war and the effects of war around us in the name of religion and yet every religion speaks of peace. Perhaps the time has come to remember our true nature, our peace. In the words of Plotinus, “Remembering is for those who have forgotten.” The practices and strategies that I offer give us a way of remembering. The practices will give us a way of “doing” and the strategies that follow will provide us with a way of “being”.

Our practices are:

1. Relax
2. Be not afraid
3. Return to the Center
4. Encounter the ‘religion of the heart’

The first thing to practice is to **Relax**: We usually think that when we are with people of a culture or religion other than our own we need to be different; we have to do something, prove something, and tell them something. We are not relaxed in each other's presence. When our bodies are at rest, our minds are at rest. When our minds are at rest, our spirits are at rest. When our spirits are at rest, deep within us the Eternal Spirit is free to act. We meet at the deepest level of each other's religion and culture in trust, freedom and without fear. This freedom takes us to the second practice.

Be not afraid: Fear is stifling and puts into our system what was not there before - bondage, doubt, anger, prejudices, suspicion, defenses. We use our creativity to destroy life rather than give life and make it possible. Any fundamentalism arises from a passion for pure belonging, a yearning intensified by globalization, science and technology. We are afraid of ourselves with our ‘many identities’. We cannot accept the truth or even

believe that we can be good Muslims or Christians as well as a good Indians or Indonesians all at the same time and that each of our identities can live in harmony with other identities. Terrorism emerges from the blind hatred of an ‘other’ which is the overflow of the lack of knowledge, incomprehension, fear and an ‘untempered temper’. We know that only love can dispel fear but to love we need to learn to see ourselves as others see us, learn ourselves, and take the time to learn the other. How are we able to do this? Our third practice will help.

Return to the Center: One can only penetrate into the inner mysteries of the other if one is daring enough to return to the Origin, to the Center, to that which is most inward. To return to the Center means to return to our own hearts and find there the quiet truth of who we are. We are so used to looking outside of ourselves and seem to get strengthened by that, that we are oblivious of the mystery that lies in the infinite world within ourselves. It is here that we possess an inner, subjective knowledge as well as knowledge of a totally objective order.

We are blessed with the gift of intelligence which allows us to know the Ultimate Reality as the Transcendent, the Beyond and the objective world as a distinct reality on its own level, and the Ultimate Reality as the Immanent, as the Supreme Self underlying all the veils of subjectivity and the many ‘selves’ or layers of consciousness within us – our hearts. This can happen with the fourth practice.

Encounter the ‘religion of the heart’: The heart of religion is the religion of the heart wherein all external forms are transcended. It is here that we find the eternal wisdom or Sophia whose brilliance emerges and shines forth from the center of every Divine message. In this time of confusion, darkness and hostility toward each other, this wisdom can give us the light of harmony and the warmth of compassion and love.

Just as I offered you four practices, I offer you four strategies.

1. Live the message
2. Open Integrity
3. Communion beyond dialogue
4. Negate the negative

The first is **Live the Message**. In the Quran it says, “Say (O Muhammad s.a.w) O people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians) Come to a word that is just between us and you, that we worship none but Allah (Alone)...” Al-Imran 64

The meaning of ‘a word’ in Arabic is referred to as *Kalimatul Sewa* – Common Platform. How do we come to that common platform? In Indonesia we had a great educator who I was privileged to meet. Prof. Dr. Nurcholish Majid. He was convinced that we could all meet at the common platform if Muslims live the message of the Al Quran and Christians the message of the Bible. I would add here, for Christians it is important to live the life of Jesus. If this can become our strategy then we are responding to each other from the depth of the Divine Message which places before us a challenge and which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.

The second strategy is an **Open Integrity**: If followers of each religion claim to have the truth then given each religions commitment to that truth the question that follows is ‘can Muslims and Christians truly listen to each other? The challenge for each of us as co-pilgrims on this journey to the Truth is to learn how to cross religious frontiers while preserving our own integrity. This is truly, an exciting intellectual adventure of our times.

The third strategy is **Communion beyond Dialogue**. To live an open integrity we need each other and we need to be in communion with each other. Human beings are created in God’s image not to kill each other but to give each other life, but alas, on the contrary, just take a look at every part of the world we are doing what we are not created for. Our dialogue is not based on communion but on mutual justification. This does not solve conflicts but deepens them. For true cooperation there has to be an inclusive "we" that leads us to communion.

Human beings are defined as being endowed with a total intelligence centered upon the Absolute and created to know the Absolute. To be human is to know and also to transcend oneself and be in communion. In the words of the present day Islamic Philosopher Prof. Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “to know means therefore ultimately to know the Supreme Substance which is at once the source of all that comprises the objective world and the Supreme Self which shines at the center of human consciousness and which is related to intelligence as the sun is related to its rays.” From the mystic’s

perspective communion it is not an “operation” but an activity which is being done, every conscious moment with great intensity and thoroughness—we can only know if we are in communion with that which we wish to know and with this we can make the words of Jesus “that they may be one” a reality. This third strategy – Communion beyond dialogue, is the direction we are called to take in our time. Perhaps the last strategy that follows will enable us to be in communion.

Negate the Negative. In the world today, the light of faith in our tradition and revelation not only provides a map of reality to the metaphysical realm but also a map to help us orient ourselves in the chaotic situation of the modern world. However, for us to be able to do this free from prejudices, our best strategy is to negate the negative. We need not to believe in the worst of each other but in the best, instilling in our world a positive energy that will awaken the consciousness to the goodness that exists in our world, especially relationships among Muslims and Christians. In this way we are offering concrete ways to make meaning of the present times and are not afraid to mold the present times according to what we know and believe and most importantly giving hope to our children who are so deserving of it

Our opening story had to do with the boy who experienced forgiveness like those women of faith who reminded us of this sacred duty during the month of Ramadan. May we go forward in a spirit of openness to forgiveness to meet in deeper communion.

For us to go forward - Let the women teach us the intelligence of their hearts!

2007 High-level Dialogue of the General Assembly on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace

The Informal Interactive Hearing of the General Assembly
Thursday 4 October 2007, 15.00 – 18.00 hrs

Best Practices and Strategies for Interreligious and Intercultural Co-operation: Going Forward

It is an acceptable fact that in today's pluralistic world, we all come in contact with followers of different religious traditions. Religions and religious traditions differ considerably. They continue to inspire and influence the lives of millions of their adherents. At the same time, it has also been the cause of many conflicts. Therefore, in the context of the divisive, exploitative, and conflictual roles that religions, including Christianity, have played in history, dialogue seeks to develop the unifying and liberating potential of all religions, thus showing the relevance of religion for human well-being, justice and world peace. It is important to have a positive understanding and relationship with believers of other faiths. I was born in the Northern part of my Country Nigeria, which is predominantly Muslim. But growing up at the time, we did not know the difference between Islam and Christianity.

1. The need to find a basis for cooperation over the issues of **Religion** and **Culture** is paramount because these two themes express and define the essence of our being. In whatever shape or form it is expressed, we are, in a sense all Religious or Cultural. These may be expressed in different and even conflicting forms. Conflicting signals create tensions and lead to misunderstanding, quarrels and often spill into violence. Religion and Culture are the most important meeting points in human activities and thus, it is important that we come to terms with those aspects of our faith and culture that cause offence or can lead to misunderstanding. Some religious or cultural norms, not properly understood can be considered by others as offensive. Let me give a few examples:

- * Among many ethnic groups in Africa, to give something with the left hand is considered an offense and also disrespectful.
- * To eat with the left hand is considered a sign of disrespect to the food and the dignity of labour
- * For a woman to cross her legs in public is considered immodest
- * For a man to offer his hand to a woman first is considered immodest.

2. The Centre for Women Studies and Intervention propelled by faith in the Creator of all beings is committed to uphold the dignity of women through conscientisation and empowerment. We do this by educating and empowering women of all **religions** on their fundamental rights as human beings and citizens of this country. To be able to carry everybody along, we organize gender sensitization programmes for the men. Ignorance on some religious and cultural issues have been the source of many conflicts. Therefore understanding some of these issues is very important. There are many examples of successful inter-religious and intercultural co-operations and collaboration. These are a few examples:

Christian and Muslim women have often come together to fight against such practices as the negative treatment of Widows, Abortions, Unequal representation at the levels of government and politics, lack of equal access to economic opportunities and so on.

The conditions of women all over the world only differ in substance as far as abuse is concerned. Wherever we turn, in almost all professions, the second class status assigned to women is taken as a given. This is why even in the most advanced democracies today, women still bear the brunt of political and economic marginalization and exclusion.

3. The concept of main actors can be controversial if we tie it to public office and visibility. Public office is transient and so we need to think more of the power of one individual to change the course of history even without holding public office: Mother Theresa, Lady Diana, Aung San Suu Kyi, Winnie Mandela among a host of others. Some of these women have left us legacies that will last beyond the ones of political office holders over time. Main actors however can often take advantage of public office and profile to open up space for women at other levels. They can do this by lending their voices to certain issues such as the conditions of women caught up with situations of war where both husbands and children are involved in war and they are forced to assume dual roles.

Men as custodians of Religions and religious traditions and cultures should not only seek to discuss issues affecting women, but should also see to its implementation, otherwise, their decisions and recommendations would remain at the level of rhetorics.

4. The UN system is the highest expression of the fact that our differences can be better harmonized when we find a common umbrella. For greater collaboration and collaboration between main actors' programmes and the initiatives of inter-religious and intercultural groups in the UN system, greater trust and respect need to be built. More often than not, we fear what we do not understand and this fear leads to prejudice. Perception then becomes the basis for the suspicion of the other.

To illustrate this point, I recall a story of two widowers, one English and the other a Chinese. By some accident, both their wives had been buried in the same grave yard and may have shared the same anniversary. For, on the day in question, both men appeared to pay respect to their loved ones. The English man brought out his bouquet of flowers and carefully began to tend them around his wife's tomb with much care and affection. The Chinese on the other hand brought out his bowl of rice and proceeded to sprinkle it on the grave of his loved wife. Suddenly, the English man looked over the Chinese man and in shock asked: *My friend, what are you doing? How could you waste a precious plate of rice on the grave of a dead person? When do you imagine that your wife can ever come out to eat this rice?* The Chinese man wistfully looked at the English man and said: *Well, who knows, when your wife wakes up to smell your flowers; she might see my wife eating her rice!*

Thank you.

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**Dr. Georgette F. Bennett
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Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding**

Best Practices and Strategies of Interreligious and
Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward
UN High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural
Understanding and Cooperation for Peace
October 4-5, 2007

Madame President, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen:

The misuse of religion within and between Member States is one of the greatest threats to stability facing the world today. But rather than seeing religion as a source of conflict, the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding has found ways that religion is a resource for reducing conflict.

I founded the Tanenbaum Center in 1992 to build on the pioneering work of my late husband, Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum. Marc was a world-renowned leader in interreligious and intercultural cooperation. His historic role included groundbreaking work with Christian-Jewish-Muslim relations; input in the drafting of Nostre Aetate, as well as his efforts on behalf of Biafrans, Vietnamese “boat people” and Cambodian refugees. Today, 15 years after my husband’s death, I’m proud that Tanenbaum is a trusted resource and a leader in providing the practical programs so urgently needed to reduce religion-based tensions and violence.

We offer programs in three areas: In education, we train educators in skills that put concepts of coexistence into practice in classrooms. In workplaces, we work with

management on policies and practices that enhance productivity and profits by creating inclusive workplaces for religiously diverse workers. In healthcare, we improve medical outcomes by training medical workers to include patients' religious needs in their treatment plans.

But today I'm here to talk about our Religion and Conflict Resolution Program. Tanenbaum has created a network of religiously-motivated peacemakers who are working on the ground in areas of armed conflict. These men and women work at great risk, without the support and recognition they deserve. Yet their interreligious and intercultural peacemaking methods are highly effective, and require our close attention.

In addition to strengthening these peacemakers' brave efforts through training and resources, Tanenbaum studies their work and identifies their most effective strategies. Our latest book, *Peacemakers in Action: Profiles of Religion in Conflict Resolution* published by Cambridge University Press, profiles 16 of these peacemakers and their best practices. Based on years of research and analysis, this book is a guide for diplomats and policy makers on how to utilize local religious peacemakers as vital grassroots partners in fostering interreligious and intercultural cooperation.

Let me share a few examples:

In Northern Ireland, *Peacemakers* **Father Alex Reid and the Rev. Roy Magee** used their moral authority to work behind-the-scenes to advance their country's peace process. These men were serving their Catholic and Protestant communities – respectively – when the Troubles first broke out. As they spoke to their people, they saw that both victims and perpetrators, paramilitary leaders and government officials, filled the seats of the churches every Sunday. By being present to their people, in the streets, Father Reid and the Rev. Magee gained credibility with their constituencies. The key links they forged would prove instrumental in the peace process.

By drawing upon the trust and respect they had gained, the men brought opposing factions together face-to-face, often for the first time. Their intra- and inter-religious mediating work led to the IRA ceasefire, which was followed by a ceasefire on the loyalist side and, eventually, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. In the words of Gerry Adams, the Irish nationalist politician, "we would not have even the possibility of a peace process if it wasn't for the unstinting, patient, diligent work of [Father Reid]...There is no doubt that he was the constant...in the development of relationships between key players."

In Ethiopia, *Peacemaker Dr. Ephraim Isaac* invigorated his country's centuries-old traditions by mobilizing community elders to serve as mediators and negotiators in conflicts. As a Yemenite Jew, in a majority Christian country, he knows that people respond best when they hear a call to peace from their own traditions. During the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict, he mobilized a multireligious network of respected elders, whose efforts helped negotiate a peace that replaced the oppressive Derg regime, and resulted in Eritrean autonomy in 1993. But this is not all. A few weeks ago, Ephraim organized a Council of Elders and negotiated the release of political opposition leaders in Ethiopia, who had been sentenced to life in prison just two months ago. The elders came from different religious backgrounds and professions, but had unmatched credibility throughout the country due to their spiritual leadership and the Ethiopian tradition of eldership. Ephraim says, "The job of the elders is to bring people together, to make peace. They use cultural clout... which is often more powerful in de-trenching entrenched ideas."

In Southern Sudan, Rev. Bill Lowery drew on the local tribes' traditions to build cooperation – the key ingredient for a peace agreement. During Sudan's civil war, the Rev. Bill Lowrey traveled from the United States to South Sudan and dedicated himself to observing Nuer and Dinka peacemaking methods. He gained their trust and became a part of the community, where he discovered the deep wisdom – and power – of their tribal practices. Adapting their shared interreligious and intercultural rituals and symbolism, Bill established a series of People-to-People

Peace conferences through the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC) in 1998. At the end of the conferences, the Dinka and Nuer signed a covenant to end their tribal war. They sealed it by sacrificing a bull, which signifies wealth for both of the tribes. By stepping over the bull, they publicly pronounced their commitment to a new peace.

The UN General Assembly Resolution 61/221 that guides today's hearings states: "despite intolerance and conflicts that are creating divides across countries and regions and constitute a growing threat to peaceful relations among nations, all cultures, religions and civilizations share a common set of universal values and can all contribute to the enrichment of human kind."

Our *Peacemakers* use the best practices and strategies for tapping into these shared values. They apply the trust and authority offered by religious and cultural traditions to build cultures of peace and reconciliation. And their successes, as described in our book, prove that local religious peacemakers are key actors – and important partners – in diplomacy today.

As religious intolerance and extremism threaten world security, representatives of the United Nations, government and civil society can find solutions by paying attention to the work of these local religious peacemakers. We all must work to better support their efforts, provide them with the safe space to do their work, and – when appropriate – ensure their place at the tables of diplomacy.

Our book is intended to be a resource for you. It is also a primer for universities and seminaries to train their students to become our future peacemakers.

I thank you for your time today, and encourage you to pay attention to these remarkable religiously motivated peacemakers. They provide us with a roadmap to making interreligious respect and cooperation a reality. Now, it is up to us to follow it.

HIGH-LEVEL DIALOGUE ON INTERRELIGIOUS AND INTERCULTURAL COOPERATION FOR PEACE

Panel 2: “Best Practices & Strategies for Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward

Rev. Dr. Carlos Cesar Tamez Luna
Rector

**”Comunidad Teológica de Honduras”, Coordinador Programa
De “Ciudadanía Ambiental Global” del
Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias, CLAI.**

MARCO DE REFERENCIA

Celebramos con profundo reconocimiento la realización de este magno evento el cual significativamente proyecta tiempos nuevos y caminos de esperanza para el logro de la paz mundial.

Sin duda el Diálogo Interreligioso e Intercultural en estos tiempos de globalización, significa abrir espacios que conducen al encuentro de los diferentes actores de la sociedad civil, las religiones y movimientos espirituales, los gobiernos y las agencias de servicio Internacional y las entidades privadas quienes en su conjunto y desde sus diferentes visiones y quehaceres, y voluntad política, pueden garantizar el logro de caminos de paz, justicia y armonía mundial entre las diferentes sociedades.

Nos sumamos a este proceso reconociendo junto con los convocadores de que existe una “gran necesidad para el entendimiento y cooperación interreligioso e intercultural es un tema de creciente atención de Gobernantes, Agencias de la ONU, Comunidades religiosas, Movimientos Espirituales Sociedad Civil y Humanistas desde el inicio del Siglo 21.”

Hemos sido convocados y desafiados a estar abiertos y multiplicar espacios en las diferentes regiones del planeta para “Escuchar acerca de las diferentes iniciativas y esfuerzos sobre un interreligioso e intercultural entendimiento y cooperación entre diferentes actores de la Sociedad Civil. Gobiernos, Movimientos religiosos y las diferentes agencias de las Naciones Unidas para impulsar una cultura de paz y un diálogo entre civilizaciones y la construcción de una Alianza de Iniciativas de Civilizaciones para una paz sustentable para el siglo 21.”

El Panel 2 nos convoca entre otros aspectos, a preguntarnos y a encontrar “Cuales son algunos de los mejores ejemplos y estrategias significativas que permitan avanzar hoy en una interreligiosa e intercultural cooperación, desde lo Local, Regional y Global y en perspectiva de diferentes contextos, Fe, tradiciones y éticas”

En esa perspectiva y en razón de encontrar paradigmas que se sumen a estos procesos Interreligiosos e Interculturales en búsqueda de unir sueños y espiritualidades para lograr la paz, celebramos el impacto que ha tenido la realización, en el mundo ecuménico, del día mundial de oración por la paz, 21 de septiembre, y la realización de actividades educativas y culturales de promoción de valores que promuevan la convivencia armoniosa y pacífica de diferentes comunidades de fe, de distintas tradiciones religiosas y comunitarias. Esta idea se propuso en 2004 con ocasión de una

reunión entre el Secretario General del CMI, Dr. Samuel Kobia, y el entonces Secretario General de la ONU, Sr. Kofi Annan, y coincide con el Día Internacional de la Paz que se celebra en el marco de las Naciones Unidas. Es una iniciativa del Decenio para Superar la Violencia del CMI.

EMERGENCIA Y NECESIDAD DEL DIALOGO INTERRELIGIOSO E INTERCULTURAL PARA AVANZAR EN EL LOGRO SOSTENIBLE DE LAPAZ.

Sin duda la paz vivida desde una nueva espiritualidad, armonía y diálogo entre las diferentes religiones y contextos culturales, inspirará y contribuirá a la paz en el mundo por su carácter, misión y vocación en quebrar barreras de odio, exclusión e injusticia.

Se hace necesario unir los esfuerzos de todos los actores sociales de las diferentes regiones del mundo; religiosos, políticos, civiles etc, para construir, desde diferentes procesos comunicacionales, educativos y culturales, y con profunda voluntad política, un mundo que conviva en base al amor, el diálogo, la solidaridad, el respeto a la diferencia y relaciones enmarcadas en la equidad y la justicia.

Estamos desafiados a construir la paz desde la reafirmación de que la dignidad de todo ser humano, sin exclusión alguna, religiosa, cultural, social y política es nuestro horizonte en todas las relaciones humanas en cualquier contexto geográfico. Esto implica la gestación de espacios inclusivos con pleno ejercicio de la participación, y pluralidad en la toma de decisiones. “No olvidando que el desarrollo pleno y sostenible de nuestras naciones pasa por la interculturalidad, y tiene un lugar importante en el debate político de los países” (I. Batista, Nuevo Siglo).

Urge trabajar con las intolerancias. La violencia generada por las intolerancias ha llegado a niveles insospechables para lo cual se hace necesario profundizar en una cultura de tolerancia, respeto y aceptación de las diferencias. Distinguimos entre estas la intolerancia religiosa, cultural, política, Intrafamiliar,

EXPERIENCIAS QUE APORTAN A LA FORMULACIÓN DE ESTRATEGIAS E INICIATIVAS PARA EL DESARROLLO DE PROCESOS DE DIALOGO Y CONSTRUCCION DE PAZ EN EL MARCO DE INTERRELIGIOSIDAD E INTERCULTURALIDAD.

1. EL lanzamiento del Decenio para Superar la Violencia, iniciativa del Consejo Mundial de Iglesias: Las iglesias y Comunidades de fe en busca de reconciliación y de paz 2001-2010 (DSV). Es un movimiento global que lucha por consolidar los esfuerzos y las redes existentes para superar la violencia, y por inspirar la creación otros nuevos movimientos.

Es una invitación a abordar los asuntos referidos a la violencia, un viaje espiritual para los individuos, las comunidades de fe y los movimientos desde un proceso de estudio y reflexión, y una oportunidad para proyectos creativos que prevengan y superen la violencia.

Este proceso con miras a inspirar movimientos religiosos y diferentes iniciativas, convoca a:

- Adoptar enfoques innovadores para la construcción de la paz que sean conformes al espíritu del Evangelio. (en el caso de las iglesias cristianas, y con enfoques propios de otras religiones y Movimientos espirituales)
- Relacionar y colaborar con las comunidades locales, los movimientos laicos y los creyentes de otras religiones para crear una cultura de paz;
- Trabajar juntos por la paz, la justicia y la reconciliación a todos los niveles – local, regional y mundial;
- Acompañar a víctimas de la opresión sistemática de la violencia a hacer frente a su situación y colaboren con todos los que luchan por la justicia, la paz y la integridad de la creación.
- Hacer frente, con un enfoque global, a las distintas formas de violencia, tanto directa como estructural, en los hogares, en las comunidades y en la esfera internacional y aprender de los análisis locales y regionales de la violencia y de las formas de superar la violencia.
- Aprender de la espiritualidad y los recursos para la construcción de la paz de otras religiones a fin de colaborar con otras comunidades en la búsqueda de la paz y exhortar a las iglesias a que reflexionen sobre el mal uso de las identidades religiosas y étnicas en las sociedades pluralistas

El Decenio para Superar la Violencia destaca y combina los esfuerzos de las Comunidades de fe, las organizaciones ecuménicas y los movimientos de la sociedad civil para superar los diversos tipos de violencia.

2. Convocatoria Ecuménica Internacional por la Paz (CEIP)

La 9ª Asamblea del Consejo Mundial de Iglesias (Porto Alegre, Brasil, febrero de 2006) decidió dar realce a la conclusión del Decenio para Superar la Violencia, celebrando una Convocatoria Ecuménica Internacional por la Paz (CEIP). La Asamblea instó asimismo a que se emprenda un amplio proceso de consultas con objeto de elaborar una declaración ecuménica sobre una paz justa. Este proceso de consultas que culminarán en la Convocatoria Ecuménica Internacional Por la paz 4 a 11 de mayo de 2011, ha de permitir una amplia y diversificada participación y abarcará muy diversos enfoques temáticos y metodológicos.

La Convocatoria tiene como objetivo dar testimonio de la Paz de Dios como don y responsabilidad de la oikoumene. Se trata de evaluar y fortalecer la posición de las Comunidades de fe en relación con la paz, de promover la creación de redes de contacto y de ahondar en nuestro compromiso común en favor de la paz y la reconciliación.

EN AMERICA LATINA DESTACAMOS EL DESARROLLO DE INICIATIVAS INTERRELIGIOSAS E INTERCULTURALES POR LA PAZ Y LA CONVIVENCIA HUMANA.

1. Desde el programa “Ciudadanía Ambiental Global” del Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias, se han desarrollado una serie de Foros Interreligiosos con amplia participación de diferentes religiones en torno a temas que tienen que ver con la sobrevivencia humana. Estos han generado declaraciones conjuntas que dejando atrás viejas confrontaciones de carácter religioso, y uniendo nuevas espiritualidades, aportan a los procesos de diálogos interreligiosos e interculturales para lograr la paz y la convivencia humana.

2. En la República de Honduras se ha dado una de las experiencias más exitosas y novedosas en campo de lo interreligioso como una iniciativa de la Lic. Noemí Ruth Espinoza. Nos referimos al proyecto que el UNFPA de Honduras quien para abordar el tema de prevención del VIH SIDA y educación en Salud y Sexualidad Reproductiva impulso la conformación de un Comité nacional Interreligioso y como parte del proceso, comités Interreligiosos locales en las principales ciudades del país. Con esta organización y sistema. Se lograron realizar desde el año 2004 más de 30 foros interreligiosos logrando posicionamientos consensuados y abrir un rico diálogo interreligioso en otros temas de interés común para la armonía de las relaciones en las familias, la sociedad y las religiones.

3. Convocatoria a las Comunidades de Fe Latinoamericanas a seguir trabajando por la construcción de una paz.

La realidad latinoamericana nos dice que la violencia en sus diversas expresiones está perturbando nuestras vidas, las de nuestros seres queridos más cercanos, de las comunidades, y a las mismas Comunidades de fe. La violencia se ha instaurado en nuestro medio, trayendo muerte a vidas inocentes, saqueando hogares, filtrándose en la educación, influenciando las esferas de poder y peor aún, siendo justificada con argumentos de carácter religioso.

La violencia intrafamiliar es una de las muestras más evidentes de cómo se sufre esta pandemia. En esta perspectiva el CLAI desea motivar a todas las comunidades de fe, congregaciones locales y diferentes confesiones y religiones, a impulsar la campaña: **"Hogares de Paz"**.

SE PRETENDE:

- Buscar nuevos estilos de vida que contribuyan a relaciones basadas en el respeto, el amor, la sinceridad, la tolerancia y la paz en el seno de las familias.
- Afirmar la resolución de conflictos como herramienta de convivencia.
- Fomentar actividades que promuevan la paz y el desarrollo de una cultura de paz, cultivando un pacifismo pro activo.
- Capacitarnos como comunidades de fe y familias para ejercer el ministerio de para y reconciliación

Esfuerzo que realicemos por erradicar la violencia será valioso en la construcción de una sociedad más hermanada y justa.

Estos procesos, unidos a los que se impulsan en los diferentes países, regiones del mundo y los programas y agencias de las Naciones Unidas, reflejan como lo hemos dicho, que estamos viviendo tiempos nuevos y abriendo caminos de esperanza en base al diálogo, la tolerancia y la construcción de una armonía y paz mundial.

FINALMENTE HACEMOS UN LLAMADO A:

1. Construir desde los distintos actores en conjunto, una cultura planetaria Interreligiosa e Intercultural basada en el diálogo que permita la apertura de las posiciones individualistas y lleve a la aceptación de las diferencias y termine con las posiciones muchas veces narcisistas de posesión de la verdad absoluta.
2. Realizar campañas sobre la promoción de los valores universales del Amor, fraternidad, solidaridad, Tolerancia y respeto entre las diferentes cosmovisiones, culturas y estilos diferentes de vida
3. Fortalecer y dar continuidad en forma mas masiva, a estos procesos de Diálogo Interreligioso e Intercultural, que consolide las alianzas estratégicas entre la Sociedad Civil, Los estados, Las diferentes religiones y las diferentes agencias y programas de las Naciones Unidas. Promoviendo estos procesos en los niveles; Familiares, Locales, Regionales y Mundiales.
4. Construir Redes desde alianzas de Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil, Estados, Instituciones privadas y las diferentes religiones que actúen como facilitadoras de procesos de diálogo Interreligioso e Intercultural de cara a la construcción de una cultura de paz en el mundo.

GRACIAS

Rev. Dr. Carlos Tamez Luna

High-Level Dialogue of the General Assembly
on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace
Informal Interactive Hearing with Civil Society

4-5 October 2007

Best Practices & Strategies for Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward

Speaker: Ms. Mitra Deliri, Bahá'í International Community

I live in Tanzania, a country whose large Christian and Muslim populations live side by side, intermarry and celebrate each other's religious festivals. It is a living example of a religious pluralism. This coexistence did not come about by accident but, rather, as a result of the vision and deliberate action of Tanzanian leaders, dating back to the country's first President, the late Mwalimu Julius Nyerere. President Nyerere succeeded in planting the seeds of harmony and instilling in citizens the sense of a common humanity; the use of Kiswahili as the national language further helped to cement a national unity. Overall, the educational reforms, policies promoting equity, the banning of political campaigning along religious lines and the reorganization of an ethnically divided tripartite system into a united judiciary have laid the foundation for a peaceful coexistence of diverse religious believers.

Knowledge as the basis for cooperation and peace

An effective dialogue leading to cooperation requires understanding, and that understanding is based on knowledge. The quality of the dialogue depends on the ability to look at issues from different perspectives, to be open to differences and to respect the contributions of various parties. It is incumbent, therefore, on all stakeholders (UN personnel, government officials and religious leaders) to familiarize themselves with the precepts of different religions. This knowledge creates the capacity for understanding and forms the basis for social cohesion.

Freedom of religion

The protection of the right to freedom of conscience, religion or belief is also central to the success of efforts to build understanding. The freedom to hold beliefs of one's choosing and to change them is a fundamental attribute of the human conscience; it enables the individual to see the world through their own eyes, to shape beliefs and actions according to the promptings of their conscience, rather than the dictates and will of another. This right is not only contingent on the state's protection but also on the exposure to new ideas as well as a climate in which information and beliefs are openly shared and discussed. Such a climate must be free from incitements to violence or hostility in the name of religion. Where contentious opinions about religions are expressed, it is the responsibility of the state to provide for right of reply. As a minimum standard, both sides must be afforded the right to respond in a peaceful and legal manner so as to allow the public to arrive at their own conclusion. It is in this climate that understanding and cooperation can take root.

Religious leaders bear a special responsibility in this regard. Indeed, they play a central role in creating a climate for understanding and cooperation. At a time of conflict and deep-seated antipathies between those of different religions and ethnic backgrounds, religious leaders must

lift up those spiritual principles most conducive to unity and justice for all humankind - that is both the greatest challenge and a standard by which their leadership must be evaluated.

Recommended Strategies

(a) Universal educational policy and curriculum

A universal, mandatory educational policy and curriculum on religion and education will be most instrumental to countering ignorance and fanaticism. The curriculum serves a two-fold purpose: first, it sets into motion a process of intellectual and spiritual (or moral) development. Second, it lays the foundation for the transformation of the structures and processes of society itself – bringing these into closer alignment with the most pressing needs of the day.

Education about religions serves to promote social justice, cohesion, and builds moral values and moral reasoning into the curriculum. Such an education helps children to affirm their own identity, while leading them to an informed understanding of the religious identities of others; it helps to develop the capacities for mutual recognition and respect for diversity. Consistent with international agreements, this approach should not promote any particular religion but engage religion as an important dimension of human life, like politics, economics, or literature, which all students should know about if they are to be educated. In line with this, teacher training should also include a component about the religions of the world.

South Africa provides one example of such an initiative. After many years of research and consultation, South Africa adopted a national policy on religion and education, guided by the constitutional values of citizenship, human rights, and equality. The policy provides a unified framework that is best for religion and best for education in a democratic¹ country.

(b) Using the media and UN regional agencies to further education goals

Some examples in use of media to promote intercultural and interreligious understanding include:

- supporting local interfaith groups by inviting and assisting them to launch *inclusive* interfaith radio and TV programs in order to promote respect, prevent conflict and achieve increased social cohesion;
- encouraging local radio and TV stations to produce programs that empower young people to be proponents of peace and not war;
- using local papers to initiate a global information campaign about values held in common by all religions and about the role of religion in promoting peace; working with local papers to prevent their manipulation or exploitation by political or religious leaders.

The use of media was emphasized in the Ford Foundation's TrustAfrica project which brought together scholars and religious leaders for a workshop in Senegal to focus on the challenges of religion and pluralism in Africa. At this unique gathering, which I attended, all participants were invited to submit concrete proposals addressing regional needs and then to put into action the subsequently agreed-upon recommendations.

(c) Prepare a compendium of innovative cooperative interfaith activities. Prepare and disseminate *case studies* of activities that stimulate intercultural and interfaith dialogue.

- (d) Undertake comprehensive research on:
- underlying reasons for the suffering of marginalized groups;
 - forces compelling the unification of humankind (e.g. mass migration, communication and globalization);
 - barriers inhibiting inter-religious cooperation;
 - key indicators for social cohesion and active citizenship.
- (e) Develop a set of operational policies and code of conduct for interreligious cooperation acceptable and approved by religious authorities. For example, in Tanzania, I participated in drafting the Memorandum of Understanding for the Tanzania Interfaith Forum. The unique feature of this Memorandum is that its Secretariat is inclusive and consists of members of various religious groups. This is both to present a model of cooperation and to ensure transparency in financial dealings.
- (f) Arrange for a meeting with Heads of State, present them with the findings of the (above) research and consult on strategies to address issues of intercultural and interfaith cooperation.
- (g) Foster social cohesion by encouraging interfaith prayer gatherings. The deepest communication, one that goes beyond words, is when people pray together.

In order to enhance interfaith cooperation, there is a need for more deliberate efforts to foster understanding between governments, the United Nations, and religious organizations at the decision-making level. The United Nations could, for example, request all government officials, UN personnel and religious leaders to familiarize themselves with the precepts of various religions. UN agencies could prepare and disseminate a standard set of informational materials in this regard. Learning about the role that religion has played in advancing human civilization, building human capacity and furthering social development would help decision-makers to discover their common humanity amidst the cultural and religious diversity.

What, after all, is the purpose of religion if not to enlighten and to unite? If religion, then, becomes a cause of division, dislike, and conflict, would it not be better to be without it? If the purpose of the remedy is to cure an ailing humanity, and the remedy only aggravates the illness, we must re-think the cure. We must examine closely those religious beliefs which do not lead to greater understanding, cooperation, and unity. In a world so divided against itself, it is those voices and practices that help us to come together that need to be echoed and amplified, no matter their label, no matter their source.

¹ South African National Policy on Religion and Education

High-Level Dialogue of the General Assembly
On Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace
Informal Interactive Hearing with Civil Society

“Best Practices & Strategies for Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward”

4 – 5 October 2007

Respondent: Steven C. Rockefeller, Earth Charter International

Among the many issues addressed by the panel speakers, they have emphasized our common humanity and the need to promote shared values. They have provided us with inspiring examples of social and ecological responsibility. They have called attention to the religion of the heart, the deep spirituality that is the well spring of our great religious traditions and the source of compassion, love, healing and reconciliation. Building upon what has been said in this regard, I would like to highlight the importance of ethics and of clarifying and acting upon our shared values. In short, my message is: promote global ethics in the midst of our rich cultural and religious diversity as a core strategy.

Our ethical values define what we consider to be right and wrong, good and bad in human conduct and in our relations with each other and the larger community of life. Our ethics reflect what kind of person we chose to be and what quality of community life we chose to sustain. Shared values are what make community and cooperation possible. In an increasingly interdependent world where our major challenges can only be addressed in and through international cooperation, shared values and global ethics are essential.

One of the most significant achievements of the United Nations over the past sixty years has been the gradual construction in and through dialogue of a new global ethic beginning with the UN Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Many UN resolutions affirm the existence of universal values. The challenge is to continue the process of constructing a global ethic in response to the world’s needs and to instill in all people and each new generation an understanding, and appreciation of and commitment to this ethical framework.

In this regard, I would like to call attention to the Earth Charter, which is an important civil society contribution to the development of a new global ethic. It is a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful world that builds on and extends the shared values affirmed in international law.

The Earth Charter consultation and drafting process is an instructive model of a very successful worldwide, intercultural and interreligious dialogue on shared values. The Earth Charter’s ethical framework for sustainable living and building a global culture of peace is also a valuable teaching tool and guide to action that is being used throughout the world by schools, universities, governments, and NGOs, including UNESCO and IUCN. It can be a valuable resource in advancing the dialogue on shared values and in building support for global ethics and cooperation for peace.

1. The Earth Charter as a Model for Intercultural Dialogue

The Earth Charter's decade long, worldwide consultation and drafting process is a model of a highly productive cross cultural and interreligious dialogue. It was started as a United Nations process and completed by a civil society initiative. It involved the most inclusive and participatory process ever associated with the drafting of an international declaration. Thousands of people and hundreds of organizations, including a large number of religious leaders, participated in the global dialogue.

The methodology used in this dialogue is instructive. Emphasis was put on the increasing interdependence of all peoples and attention focused on the fundamental challenges faced by all peoples. The goal was to identify widely shared ethical values and principles on which humanity must act in order to address these challenges. We found that people from different cultures and religious traditions often have very different philosophical and religious reasons for embracing ethical values many of which they hold in common. In the Earth Charter consultation process we respected and learned from these differences, but we did not try to bridge them. Instead we focused primarily on reaching agreement regarding the basic ethical principles that should guide conduct in the 21st Century. With this focus and close attention to the use of appropriate language, we were able to give expression to the consensus on critical ethical values that is taking form in the emerging global civil society.

Nurturing respect for cultural and religious diversity and developing an understanding of different worldviews is very important. However, intercultural and interreligious dialogue can be especially effective when attention is focused on where different worldviews overlap regarding ethical values and practical action with reference to common problems. The Earth Charter is evidence that with this approach much can be accomplished in laying an ethical foundation for building community locally, regionally and globally.

In the concluding section of the Earth Charter entitled "The Way Forward," the statement is made that "We must deepen and expand the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter, for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom." The Earth Charter itself can be used as a framework for ongoing interreligious and intercultural dialogue. It focuses attention on the critical issues and ethical choices that will shape the future of life on Earth. Many organizations today are giving special attention to the dialogue between Islam and the West, and the Earth Charter is already being used effectively in the Middle East. A number of leaders from Muslim nations, including Ambassador Mohammed Sahnoun of Algeria, Princess Basma bin Talal of Jordan, and Ambassador Erna Witoelar of Indonesia played major roles in the creation of the Earth Charter and continue to promote its use and implementation.

2. The Earth Charter as a Teaching Tool and Guide to Action

The Earth Charter is a valuable teaching tool for promoting and understanding shared ethical values and global ethics, and it provides an excellent overview of what is required to build a global culture of peace in the 21st Century. The Earth Charter is already being used widely in schools, colleges, universities and seminaries, and Earth

Charter International (ECI) operates an Earth Charter Center for Education at the UN-mandated University for Peace in Costa Rica. ECI has also just launched a new initiative designed to engage religious communities with the Earth Charter.

The Earth Charter is a valuable teaching resource for a number of reasons.

- It emphasizes that all human beings are one human family interrelated with the larger community of life and all share a common destiny.
- It clarifies the critical challenges and choices facing the human community.
- It presents an inclusive, integrated ethical vision that builds on international law and the findings of UN summits, draws upon the wisdom of the world's religions, and expresses the consensus on shared values taking form in civil society.
- Beginning with its preamble and its first principle, the Earth Charter puts strong emphasis on respect for both cultural and biological diversity.
- The Earth Charter, which was initially proposed by the UN World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987, puts special emphasis on the need for environmental protection and sustainable development. The Earth Charter principles present a comprehensive definition of the meaning of sustainable development, and they make clear the interdependence of ecological sustainability, social and economic justice, and non-violence and peace.
- The Earth Charter culminates in its final principles with a vision of “a culture of tolerance, non-violence and peace.” The whole Charter can be read as a declaration on the core elements essential to creating a culture of peace.

UNESCO's conference of member states has endorsed the Earth Charter as a valuable ethical framework for sustainable development and teaching tool, and Earth Charter International is a partner with UNESCO in promoting the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. UNEP is also currently using the Earth Charter in some of its training programs.

The Earth Charter has been translated into over 40 languages and thousands of organizations, including IUCN, governments and religious communities, have endorsed the Declaration. It provides an inclusive and integrated ethical framework that is an effective guide to cooperative action in support of sustainable development and the building of a culture of peace.

In conclusion, I would like to share several reflections on interreligious dialogue and peace and on the Earth Charter and the United Nations. Given the current world situation, interreligious dialogue should be conducted at three different levels. First, each religious tradition needs to hold its own internal dialogues in an effort to ensure that its sacred symbols and texts are not used by extremists to promote intolerance, hatred and violence. Second, there is a need for dialogue among all the religions with the goal of creating a community of the world's religions that is a model of tolerance, mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. There will always be disagreements between various religions, but problematical disagreements should be addressed through ongoing dialogue in a way

that deepens mutual understanding and promotes new insight. Third, the world's religions should be engaged in the larger worldwide dialogue on shared values and global ethics that has gone on at the United Nations for decades and that has been advanced by civil society through initiatives like the Earth Charter. The involvement of the world's religions will deepen this global dialogue. It will also help the world's religions better understand the great challenges that face the human community and will give religious leaders a better sense of how to fulfill their responsibilities as global citizens.

As the United Nations becomes more deeply involved in intercultural and interreligious dialogue, consideration should be given to consolidating some programs and to coordinating initiatives with overlapping goals and objectives. There is recognition of this need in UN General Assembly Resolution 61/221, which requests the Secretary General to ensure "overall coordination and coherence in its interreligious, intercultural and intercivilizational dialogue and cooperation efforts, inter alia, through the designation of a focal unit in the Secretariat to handle these matters." This would be a major step in the right direction. There could be benefits in even greater coordination and collaboration. The Earth Charter's inclusive, integrated ethical framework can be used to suggest other ways of coordinating UN initiatives in support of intercivilizational cooperation, building a culture of peace, and sustainable development. For example, UNESCO could further integrate its work on the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development with its programs in intercultural cooperation and a culture of peace, and the Alliance of Civilizations could help promote the ethics of sustainable living.

Finally, formal recognition in a document adopted by the UN General Assembly of the Earth Charter as an important contribution from civil society to the construction of a global ethical framework for sustainable development and world peace would strengthen the Earth Charter's soft law status and its capacity to help the UN achieve its goals for interreligious and intercultural cooperation for peace.

Note: For more information on the Earth Charter see the Earth Charter website:
www.earthcharter.org

**BEST PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES FOR INTER-RELIGIOUS
AND INTERCULTURAL COOPERATION GOING FORWARD**

***COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP — A NEW MINDSET FOR
TACKLING GLOBAL ISSUES***

Effenus Henderson, Chief Diversity Officer, Weyerhaeuser Company

Mr. Secretary General, Madam President, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen:

On Weyerhaeuser Company's behalf, I am honored for this opportunity to address a high-level dialogue session of the United Nation's General Assembly on Inter-religious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace.

I've been asked to talk about best practices and lessons I've learned as the diversity director of a major corporation, and how these lessons might contribute to a healthy dialogue on global peacemaking.

But before I talk about best practices, I would like to share a personal story.

I grew up on a small farm in rural North Carolina. Shortly after I turned thirteen, I experienced a significant family event that altered my childhood and, perhaps, led to my career in corporate diversity — and to this podium today.

My mother, 39 years old at the time, was dying in our home from a disease called Lupus. As the disease progressed, she was moved from our house to a nearby hospital. When she was about to leave, she called me aside and handed me a handkerchief with a collection of dollars and loose change totaling about 19 dollars. It was all she possessed, and she gave it to me for safekeeping.

A few days later she died, one day after the first birthday of my youngest brother.

That evening, I quietly retrieved the handkerchief from where I had kept it and handed it to my father. In doing so, I passed on my mother's small legacy and recognized my father as the man who would lead our poor family of twelve. And he did pull us together. And we did move forward. And though, at the time — angry and depressed — I questioned my God for taking my mother, it was our faith and her legacy of love that bound us together.

Now you may be asking: What does a story of a grief-stricken boy in rural North Carolina have to do with issues of corporate and global diversity? I think the connection is clear. Like a family that has experienced a devastating loss, we must acknowledge that we *all* share a common destiny. If we are to solve some of our most pressing global problems — such as displacement, disease and climate change — we must adopt a mindset that is open to diverse perspectives, backgrounds and experiences.

As a Weyerhaeuser representative, I've participated in a number of inter-company collaborations on a range of human-resource topics with one goal in mind — to make business operations more inclusive. But achieving this requires more than teaching documented best practices and strategies, which leaders and employees may carry out in a rote and detached way.

Achieving diversity requires a mindset that genuinely understands the stark necessity of collaborative approaches to solving problems.

As a young boy, I realized only my father could lead my family from a place of sorrow to restoration and wholeness. To solve emerging global issues, it's equally important to acknowledge the role business leaders can play. I've recently supported the work of Business Opportunities for Leadership Diversity or BOLD, where CEOs and diversity officers of major companies came together

to plan common strategies that advance inclusion goals. The imperative is clear — leaders must model a spirit of inclusiveness so that diverse viewpoints are encouraged, voiced and heard.

In addition to leadership, the value of *collaboration* among corporations, NGOs, civil rights, religious and environmental groups must be recognized and encouraged. Collaboration, however, is built on trust. And, historically, trust between business executives and social activists is in short supply.

On this front, I am pleased to report that we are seeing progress. Both corporations and NGOs are beginning to realize they need each other — especially in developing countries. For corporations, working with NGOs can enhance their reputation and open doors to new markets. And NGOs benefit from business practices that increase efficiencies and accelerate the eradication of poverty.

Finally, I'd like to address the issue of limited resources — often an argument for intransigence on critical issues.

I think this can best be illustrated with an example of corporate and NGO cooperation between Weyerhaeuser and CARE International. In 2000, the Weyerhaeuser Company Foundation formed a long-term partnership with CARE to promote sustainable forestry. The partnership began its work in Nepal, where an over-reliance on forest resources compromised the region's environmental integrity.

With company grants, CARE implemented literacy programs for women, held classes on sustainable forest practices, and supported the development of farm products that could be sold at local markets. Over time, villagers began to take control of their economic future without depleting valuable natural resources.

When my mother handed me a handkerchief containing her worldly savings of \$19, she left her family a small but invaluable resource that took us to a place where we could heal, work together and prevail.

Similarly, strategic corporate grants in the hands of knowledgeable and committed people can transform struggling communities around the world.

To move forward as a united community of men and women, we must trust in our collective power to shape the future in these deeply troubling times — even if the future appears as bleak and uncertain as it did to me when I was a 13-year-old boy.

Indifference and despair will only divorce us from our common humanity. The alternative is to go forward — to embrace the value inherent in our religious, racial and cultural differences. In doing so, we will tap the leadership, creativity and political momentum essential to strengthen peacekeeping efforts, eradicate poverty and protect the resources of an endangered planet.

Thank you for your time.

Effenus Henderson

**High-Level Dialogue of the General Assembly
on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace
Informal Interactive Hearing with Civil Society**

October 4 – 5, 2007

Best Practices & Strategies for Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward

Respondent: Yoshioka Tatsuya, Director, Peace Boat

Cooperation, mutual respect and ultimately peace, can only be reached between peoples when there is a base of genuine understanding and knowledge to build from. In order to achieve the conditions in which such understanding and knowledge can flourish; we must first look at the underlying reasons for divisions between peoples, which are unfortunately too often exploited by leaders.

I believe that true interreligious and intercultural cooperation can only be achieved when past mistakes and injustices have been acknowledged and atoned for, such as the injustices of colonialism, racism, human rights abuses or other evils. In the case of my own region, Northeast Asia, tremendous divisions and misconceptions exist between our peoples even at the grassroots level, and this is largely as a result of a failure to acknowledge the reality of the past.

Recent events, such as the controversy and protests over Japan's revisionist high school history textbooks, have shown that the deep wounds of the past continue to bleed into the present day and are a barrier to cooperation and understanding. Such problems of an unresolved past plague many other regions, and religions, of the world. Governments and other stakeholders must engage in an open dialogue on history, in order to understand the sensitivities felt by various groups over historical events and episodes and, by doing so, prevent future conflict and create the conditions where genuine interreligious and intercultural cooperation can flourish.

In General Assembly resolution 61/221, on the promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace, it states:

"...education at all levels is one of the principle means to build a culture of peace."

I believe that education is the key to building real understanding between peoples. As others have said today, education changes both the individual and the potential for their path through life, and the deep core of society for the future. Education on religion and religious differences

and similarities is essential, and should form part of a comprehensive peace education curriculum in all schools in every nation of the world. I recommend peace education, defined by the Hague Appeal for Peace Global Campaign for Peace Education as "...a participatory holistic process that includes teaching for and about democracy and human rights, nonviolence, social and economic justice, gender equality, environmental sustainability, disarmament, traditional peace practices, international law, and human security." (1)

I believe that such education should not only be confined to schools, however, but a lifelong learning approach should be taken in the informal sector, involving civil society, governments and the UN at all levels. The organization I founded, *Peace Boat* (2), is devoted to bringing people of all ages together across the world at a grassroots level through peace voyages. Through my work, I've found that the opportunity to meet "*the other*" face-to-face, and to hear their testimony firsthand is a life-changing experience, even for people who previously held strong prejudices.

Especially in regions where political conditions make official-level dialogue between nations challenging, such as Northeast Asia, grassroots people-to-people contact conducted by civil society groups must be encouraged as a confidence-building measure. Currently, processes such as the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (3) are creating the conditions where this kind of dialogue can take place.

In the final analysis, real understanding and cooperation for peace can only be achieved when the threat of war is removed. I hope that people everywhere will work towards a framework to abolish war, as Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution (4) attempts to do.

I would like to end with an example of best practice in intercultural communication that takes into account the aspects of historical recognition and peace education in the informal sector. Japan-based *Peace Boat* and Korean NGO *Green Foundation* have started a ground-breaking project for dialogue and understanding between Koreans, Japanese and others in East Asia. The *Peace and Green Boat* is a ten-year project for reconciliation towards future cooperation and is bringing together 600 Japanese and Koreans annually to take part in educational voyages around the East Asia region. Their multi-generational, intercultural communication and dialogue focuses on learning together about the past as a way to forge understanding for the future. I believe such innovative projects at the grassroots level should be supported by international society as a way towards building a peaceful and sustainable world in this century.

1 <http://www.haguepeace.org>

2 <http://www.peaceboat.org>

3 <http://www.gppac.net>

4 "Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. 2) In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized." Article 9 of the Constitution of Japan.

**2007 High-Level Dialogue of the General Assembly on Interreligious
and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace**

The Informal Interactive Hearing of the General Assembly

Thursday, 4 October 2007

**Panel 2: Best Practices and Strategies for Interreligious
and Intercultural Co-operation: Going Forward**

**Fatima Ahmed / Executive Director
Zenab for Women in Development / Sudan
zenab@zenab.org**

Sudan, is at the heart of Africa, covering an area of about one million square miles, with a population calculated at approximately 38 million (wikipedia.sudan) It shares borders with nine countries: Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya and Uganda. The Nile River, which wanders more than 4,000 miles from the lakes of Central Africa to the Mediterranean, flows through it. Sudan is considered amongst the most diverse nations in the world with more than 250 local tribes and languages. Its three main religions are Islam (approximately 70%), Christianity and African traditional religions which form approximately 30%. (wikipedia.sudan)

Currently, Sudan is suffering from a political and cultural crisis due to conflict in various regions, as well as the legacy of more than thirty years of civil war between the North and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in the South. Although the war was not based on religious differences, the warring parties used religion as partial justification for conflict. Now with the focus on a conflict in Sudan between those of the same religion, cultural differences are given as the cause. Neither differences in religion nor culture are the exclusive sources of these conflicts, but both are easy to misuse. Many reasons - historical, colonial, religious, conflict and distance have caused limited dialogue between people of the Sudan, particularly between peoples of the North and South. Still, there is a great amount of cultural overlap, and both formal and informal interreligious and intercultural dialogue processes do exist. Notably, informal dialogue functions very well at the grassroots level. This grassroots work should be supported in order to strengthen efforts to more effectively bring peace to our communities.

There are many interreligious activities involving Christians, Muslims and people of traditional religions, such as peace-initiative programs, peace-building programs specifically for women and youth, and advocacy dialogues. These activities are carried out by various NGOs and other civil society groups. I want to stress the central importance of the role of indigenous Sudanese organizations. In addition to work on an international level, especially with other African NGOs, Zenab for Women in Development (ZWD) is one of the very active indigenous NGOs doing this work in Sudan. Our most recent peace-building activity finished just last week. It was a large program held at one of the biggest displaced-persons camps around Khartoum, with the majority of the population from the South. The program ran for three weeks, and included three workshops and 170 people, religious and local community leaders, youth, women, civil society representatives. The first workshop educated people on the various Protocols of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government of Sudan at the North and the SPLA, in the second week the workshop discussed peace building, and in the third week the focus was conflict resolution. Now these 170 people are going out into the communities to fulfill enhanced roles as true peacemakers.

With the current international climate focused on terrorism and political extremism, and in the context of globalization, this interreligious and intercultural dialogue has an elevated meaning and challenge to work towards peace and world unity.

Recommendations for the International Level:

Urge the international community to adopt a strong international charter for the rights of religious minorities; for the protection of the rights of minority Christian communities and others in majority Muslim countries, and for the rights of minority Muslim communities and others in majority Christian countries. Call upon Christian and other religious leaders from the West to confront the trend of racism and anti-Islamic stereotypes in western societies, and for similar confrontations in Muslim societies. Call upon the media in these communities to play an effective role in this dialogue instead of fostering bias and ignorance, and urge all international non-governmental organizations to distribute humanitarian assistance on a non-discriminatory basis.

Recommendations for Sudan:

1. Urge the international community to work with renewed commitment toward a peaceful resolution of the Sudanese conflict;
2. Facilitate interreligious and intercultural dialogue workshops in each state of the Sudan that bring all communities together to facilitate a common understanding of the issues confronting their constituents and to work toward solutions that accommodate diverse religious and cultural views;
3. Begin development of a post-conflict educational curriculum to assist in the establishment of a culture of peace, starting at the primary level, through high school and university levels;
4. Undertake a joint reconciliation training program for religious and community leaders, scholars, and others. This will build bridges between communities to reduce inter-tribal fighting, promote peace and respect for religious and cultural rights;
5. Develop national programming for radio and television, including Muslim-Christian-traditional content, that reflects the cultural and religious diversity of Sudan and which satisfies the needs of the various religious communities;
6. Involve religious leaders in the peace process and build their capacities to be more effective in dealing with conflicts;
7. Establish an independent Inter-Religious Council to address religious issues and make related recommendations to the relevant authorities and entities; and
8. Strengthen peace efforts through eradication of poverty, sustainable development, and the empowerment of women.

Once a lasting peace is established, Sudan has the potential to become a model to the world -- a model that combines the best of both the African and Arab cultures -- a model in which diversity is celebrated and an elevated sense of brotherhood prevails.

ANNEX:
UN System activities in the field of interreligious and intercultural cooperation

Working with cultural and religious partners is critical to meet the Millennium Development Goals in 2015. UNESCO and UNFPA are two UN agencies that have done much work with Swiss, German, French and Swedish assistance. Culture is the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, which encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs". Culture is a positive resource. One's own values matter, if we aim to bring change and transformation from inside. Partnering with faith based organizations is not new to UNESCO and UNFPA, because FBOs commonly provide 80% of the basic social services and its leaders are a main point of reference in the communities where people turn to for advice. This rich experience now needs to be systematized.

UNESCO is entrusted with the mandate to build "the defenses of peace in the minds of men" through five fields of competence: education, culture, sciences, communication and information. Intercultural dialogue, together with poverty alleviation, sustainable development and peace building constitute the core elements of UNESCO's mission. In a globalizing world, intercultural dialogue is becoming a new paradigm to meet contemporary challenges, in which context, interfaith dialogue is an essential component. UNESCO fulfills its functions as: i) a laboratory of ideas (i.e., reaching shared understandings on language differences on complex issues); ii) a standard-setting body (i.e., UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity of 2001); iii) a clearing house to share facts, lessons and good practices (i.e. the database "UNESCO Platform on Learning from the Practice of Intercultural Dialogue-Experience, Methods, Tools"); iv) a capacity-building mechanism working closely with Member States (i.e. "Mainstreaming Principles of Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue in Policies for Sustainable Development"); and v) a catalyst for international cooperation (i.e. UNESCO Chairs on Intercultural Dialogue). UNESCO's Strategy for 2008-2013 highlights the importance of exchange and dialogue among cultures for social cohesion, reconciliation and peace, and promotes cultural diversity as inseparable from dialogue. At (sub) regional initiatives, including traditional, religious, women and youth leaders, UNESCO underscores the role of quality education and respecting human rights perspectives in different cultural settings. The Dakar Education For All goals stress the role played by culture, as a vehicle for reconciliation in conflict or post-conflict situations, and the importance of free, independent and pluralistic media in promoting mutual understanding.

UNFPA developed a vision to partner with faith based and cultural organizations on issues of reproductive health, gender equality, population and development thirty years ago, when it helped establish the International Centre for Population Research in the Al Azhar University in Cairo. This approach was reaffirmed in 1994 with the International Conference on Population and Development. As a result of this experience and building on a series of regional consultations and trainings, UNFPA developed a 'cultural lens' as part of its 'culturally sensitive approach to programming" building on human rights and gender equality considerations. This is documented in its report on Culture Matters (2004). UNFPA will continue to conduct trainings on culturally sensitive approaches for various UN Country Teams over the course of 2008, build a global network of faith based women's organizations and host regional faith-based consultations, to culminate in UNFPA's Global Forum for faith-based development partnerships in October 2008 in Istanbul.

The Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat (UN/DESA) has a longstanding involvement in intercultural issues. As the UN entity servicing the Economic and Social Council, including its Commission on Social Development and the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, UN/DESA produces extensive policy analyses and normative work on issues such as social inclusion and the status of indigenous peoples. This work always seeks to promote

intercultural dialogue within and among communities. UN/DESA is moreover mandated to bring various entities of the UN system together in support of the intergovernmental process; hence, it is in charge of supervising documentation submitted to the General Assembly on the culture of peace, intercultural and interfaith dialogue and the dialogue among civilizations and provides secretariat support to debates on related agenda items, in close collaboration with UN family organizations.

The Alliance of Civilizations (AoC) aims to improve understanding and cooperative relations among nations and peoples across cultures and religions and, in the process, to help counter the forces that fuel polarization and extremism. It was established in 2005, at the initiative of the Governments of Spain and Turkey, under the auspices of the United Nations. In April 2007, the United Nations Secretary-General appointed Mr. Jorge Sampaio, former President of Portugal, as High Representative for the Alliance. The AoC is supported by a Group of Friends – a community of over 70 member countries and international organizations and bodies. Working in partnership with governments, international and regional organizations, civil society groups, foundations and the private sector, the AoC is supporting a range of initiatives aimed at building bridges among a diversity of cultures and communities (i.e. an online clearinghouse of best practices, materials and resources on cross-cultural dialogue projects, a Rapid Response Media Mechanism to provide platforms for constructive debate at times of increased tensions around cross-cultural issues). In January 2008, the AoC will host its first global Forum in Madrid to develop partnerships and launch initiatives to support cross-cultural understanding.

Concept Note

Informal Interactive Hearing with Civil Society

2007 High-level Dialogue of the General Assembly on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace

Background:

On 25 May 2007, the General Assembly adopted draft resolution A/61/L.60 entitled "High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace". The Office of the President of the United Nations General Assembly has convened a 'Task Force' of civil society representatives to help ensure the effective participation of civil society, including non-governmental organizations and the private sector, in the High-level Dialogue, scheduled to be held on 4 and 5 October 2007.

The great need for *Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace* is a theme that has attracted increased attention amongst governments, UN agencies, religious communities, spiritual movements, civil society and humanists at the beginning of the 21st century.

The effects of globalization processes, international travel and migration, the fast-expanding capacities of communication, tensions amongst diverse ethnic and religious groups, the realities of war, worldwide threats of terrorism, and the grave consequences of global climate change, have all highlighted the urgent need to deepen the cooperation and understanding between cultures, religions, and civilizations. Multi-stakeholder partnerships need to be developed to respond effectively to these global crises, enabling the shared engagement of very diverse constituencies.

The General Assembly Resolution A/61/221 entitled "Promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace" adopted on 20 December 2006 by all Member States provides a good introduction to the theme of interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace, acknowledging the importance of freedom of religion and belief as well as emphasizing the need for respect for a diversity of religions and cultures.

The United Nations has a long record of defending freedom of religion and belief as a fundamental human right and a foundation for peace and justice. First stated by the global community in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this right was given the force of international law by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In 1981 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

In addition, the many interreligious and intercultural initiatives and activities that religious communities, interreligious organizations, humanists and other civil society organizations have been conducting in an organized manner now for over a century need to be acknowledged and lessons learned from this rich history. While the amount of organized intercultural and interreligious activities has continued to increase through the last century, this has not been able to

significantly diminish or stop violence and discrimination taking place as a result of misuse of religious sentiments and loyalties.

Social, economic, environmental, and territorial issues are often the underlying reasons for conflicts and tensions, which are then aggravated and exploited by extremists manipulating the loyalties and grievances of diverse cultural, ethnic or religious groups. The UN system and its agencies, as well as other multilateral institutions and regional bodies, are addressing now this complex set of challenges and are seeking ways forward, in order to find policies, structures and programmes that can acknowledge and respond to the multiple causes as well as the interdependencies of the current crises we are facing concerning the above outlined issues.

Objectives:

The High-Level Dialogue and its informal Interactive Hearing aim to strengthen efforts of interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation by engaging a variety of actors and constituencies, especially in government, civil society and the United Nations system. These three parties have also been at the core of the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace formed after the 2005 Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace. The High-level Dialogue further seeks to promote a culture of peace and dialogue among civilizations, advance multi-stakeholder coalitions, including with the private sector on related issues, further strengthen the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, and translate shared values into action in order to achieve sustainable peace in the 21st Century.

These objectives are also built on a diverse series of activities and initiatives undertaken by religious NGOs, interreligious organizations and various UN agencies especially over the last two decades. The most widely publicized UN initiatives include, inter alia, the UNESCO *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2001), the UNFPA *Culture Matters* (2004) and the Report of the *Alliance of Civilizations* (2006). Another notable resource is the *Final Document of the International Consultative Conference on School Education in Relation with Freedom of Religion or Belief, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination* of the Madrid Conference (2001).

Similarly, the General Assembly held on 10 and 11 May 2007 an informal Thematic Debate on 'Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace: obstacles and opportunities' to explore the reasons behind the growing level of mistrust between people of different religions and cultures; and to examine how and why cultural and religious differences increasingly fuel, and are used to justify, conflicts.

As a means of stimulating discussion during the Interactive Civil Society Hearing on the afternoon of 4 October 2007 toward the achievement of the above-mentioned objectives, the following guiding questions are offered for consideration:

Questions for the 1st Panel, "Challenges of Interreligious & Intercultural Cooperation Today"

- Who are the 'main actors' of interreligious and intercultural cooperation across all sectors (civil society, government, UN) today? What does it mean to be a 'main actor'?
- What are the current modalities of interreligious and intercultural cooperation? How has it changed markedly from the past since the onset of globalization? How can we characterize regional differences?
- What are the most pressing current issues and greatest barriers to successful interreligious and intercultural cooperation that the 'main actors' face today?
- What are the relations between culture & religion? Is there a widely accepted relation or does it depend on context, historical and local differences?

Questions for the 2nd Panel, "Best Practices & Strategies for Interreligious & Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward"

- What are some examples of successful interreligious and intercultural cooperation today, locally, regionally, globally? What elements/aspects of these examples can be applied to other contexts, regions, faiths, ethical traditions?
- How can the 'main actors' strengthen interreligious and intercultural cooperation in the future (i.e. what modalities, processes and institutional arrangements can be found)?
- How can the interaction between the 'main actors', programmes, and initiatives for interreligious and intercultural cooperation in the UN system context be better coordinated, enabling more cohesion and synergies (for example, as called for in A/RES/61/221)?

Outcomes:

The desired outcomes of the High-Level Dialogue and its informal Interactive Hearing are not only to build upon, but also to develop further the outcomes of key conferences and initiatives mentioned in General Assembly resolution A/61/221 and under the 'Objectives' section of this concept note. While some outcome proposals (see some selected examples below) made at earlier conferences have already been implemented, much work yet remains to widen and strengthen the network of participating actors, to more effectively institutionalize their work with and through the UN, to significantly raise the level of political support and resources committed, and to dramatically increase the number and quality of ground-level implementation projects underway.

For example, following the conclusion of the 2005 Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace held at UN headquarters, the outcome on strategies to enhance interfaith cooperation towards peace was transmitted to the President of the 59th Session of the General Assembly as input to the High Level Plenary Meeting in September 2005. In the search for cohesion, cooperation and further

development, building on past conferences as well as other like minded initiatives, it is helpful to recall some of the then (2005) intended outcomes:

- An expansion and deepening of the relationship between the United Nations and civil society, including religious nongovernmental organizations;
- Practical actions in the fields of education and the media in order to foster understanding, tolerance and cooperation between peoples of different religions and beliefs so as to overcome intolerance and combat stereotypes and misperceptions, with particular reference to the Programme of Action under the Global Agenda for the Dialogue Among Civilizations (2001);
- The formation of an open-ended tripartite group composed of representatives from Member States, the United Nations system, and non-governmental organizations to follow these issues through mechanisms already available in the United Nations system but also by identifying new ways to address interreligious, intercultural and intercivilizational issues and concerns, including the opportunity and mechanism for religious leaders to speak, interact and respond more clearly and quickly in times of violence, crises and conflict;
- An invitation to the Secretary-General to explore enhancing implementation mechanisms and to follow up on the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace and the Global Agenda for Dialogue Among Civilizations of 2001 adopted by the General Assembly and other initiatives on dialogue among cultures and civilizations.

Since then (2005) the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace and the Alliance of Civilizations have been launched, both building on years of preparatory work and their own distinct origins.

UN agencies have continued to engage with intercultural and interreligious issues, for example UNESCO in its intercultural and interreligious programmes, UNFPA in seeking culturally sensitive approaches and UNICEF in working together with religious communities on a wide range of programmes for children.

The initiatives and organizations mentioned here in the concept note, as well as other like minded organizations working locally, regionally and globally, continue in their efforts to implement their respective strategies and recommendations. Participants in this Interactive Hearing are encouraged to bring in their expertise, ideas and best practices to advance interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation everywhere in the world and to strengthen the outreach to support this cause.

Further and more detailed information on selected major conferences, initiatives and reference documents can be found on the web site of the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace:

<http://www.un.org/ga/president/61/follow-up/hld-interreligious.shtml>

2007 High-level Dialogue of the General Assembly on Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation and Understanding for Peace

On 25 May 2007, the General Assembly adopted draft resolution A/61/L.60 entitled "High-Level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace". The Office of the President of the United Nations General Assembly has convened a 'Task Force' of civil society representatives to help ensure the effective participation of civil society, including non-governmental organizations and the private sector, in the High-level Dialogue, scheduled to be held on 4 and 5 October 2007.

The Task Force will report to the Office of the President of the General Assembly and seek to provide a key link to relevant civil society networks and organizations globally. Task Force representatives will be asked to work with the UN to facilitate the optimal engagement of civil society in the High-level Dialogue, taking into account the constraints of time, budget, and the rules of procedure of the General Assembly.

I Mission of the Civil Society Task Force:

The Civil Society Task Force will help support the Office of the President of the General Assembly in key decisions relating to civil society's input into the High-level Dialogue, in particular as regards the participation of civil society in the interactive hearing of the General Assembly with civil society, including non-governmental organizations and the private sector, to be held on the afternoon of 4 October 2007.

II Composition of the Civil Society Task Force:

The members of the Civil Society Task Force represent:

- Networks specialized in interfaith dialogue
- Networks specialized in intercultural dialogue
- The private sector
- The media
- The Committee of Religious NGOs

III Criteria for the selection of Task Force Members

Task Force members were selected following consultation with representatives of non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council and all relevant United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, as well as the Office of the High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations. This group sought to ensure that collectively the Task Force members:

- equitably represent stakeholders in all regional groups of the United Nations
- represent various religions and cultures
- are experts and have actively engaged in interreligious and intercultural dialogue

- constitute a gender balanced group
- include a youth / children's perspective

Task Force members were selected on the understanding they can commit to volunteer the appropriate time and effort from June to October 2007.

In addition, Advisers have been asked to support the Task Force, acting as an interface with the broad NGO groupings affiliated to the United Nations that they represent, as well as other relevant civil society constituents that may not be directly represented on the Task Force.

CIVIL SOCIETY TASK FORCE MEMBERS:

Alexander, Ari (Mr.)

Co-Executive Director
Children of Abraham

Aram, Kezevino (Dr. /Ms.)

Director
Shanti Ashram

Avdovic, Erol (Mr.)

UN Correspondent
Deutsche Welle

Sakurai, Hiro (Mr.)

Former President
Committee of Religious NGOs

Sarre, Katy (Mrs.)

Chief Executive Officer
INFOGEST

Van Osdol, Judith (Rev.)

Coordinator for the Women and Gender Pastoral
Latin American Council of Churches

ADVISERS:

Bloem, Renate (Ms.)

President
CONGO (Conference of NGOs in consultative relationship with the United Nations)

Boehle, Josef (Dr.)

Coordinator

UNESCO Chair in Interfaith Studies, University of Birmingham, UK

Kirby, Joan (Sr.)

Chair

NGO/DPI Executive Committee

Vendley, William (Dr.)

Secretary General

Religions for Peace

EX-OFFICIO:

ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

DESA NGO Section

DGACM

DPI

GLOBAL COMPACT

OPGA

UN-NGLS

UNEP

UNESCO

UNFPA

UNICEF



General Assembly

Distr.: General
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Sixty-first session
Agenda item 44

Resolution adopted by the General Assembly

[without reference to a Main Committee (A/61/L.60 and Add.1)]

61/269. High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace

The General Assembly,

Recalling its resolution 61/221 of 20 December 2006, entitled “Promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace”, in particular its decision to convene in 2007 a high-level dialogue on interreligious and intercultural cooperation for the promotion of tolerance, understanding and universal respect on matters of freedom of religion or belief and cultural diversity, in coordination with other similar initiatives in this area,

Acknowledging the developments in mutually reinforcing and mutually inclusive initiatives, such as the progress in the implementation of the plan of action on dialogue among civilizations, the appointment of the High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations and other interfaith and intercultural initiatives at the national, regional, interregional and international levels,

1. *Decides* to hold the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace on 4 and 5 October 2007 at the ministerial or highest possible level, and decides that it shall be organized as follows:

(a) Three plenary meetings will be held, one on the morning of 4 October and two on 5 October 2007;

(b) The overall theme of the High-level Dialogue will be “Interreligious and intercultural cooperation for the promotion of tolerance, understanding and universal respect on matters of freedom of religion or belief and cultural diversity”;

2. *Also decides* to hold an informal interactive hearing on the afternoon of 4 October with representatives of civil society, including representatives of non-governmental organizations and the private sector, to be chaired by the President of the General Assembly;

3. *Requests* the President of the General Assembly to determine the list of invited participants to the informal interactive hearing and its exact format and organization, in consultation with Member States, taking into account the views of the High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, the relevant United Nations agencies, funds and programmes and representatives of non-governmental

organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, and to prepare an informational note on the organization of work of the informal interactive hearing;

4. *Also requests* the President of the General Assembly to include in his closing remarks the highlights of the informal interactive hearing and, later, to circulate a summary of the discussions of the hearing;

5. *Invites* the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, in cooperation with the concerned United Nations agencies, funds and programmes and other relevant bodies of the United Nations system, to contribute to the preparation of the High-level Dialogue and the informal interactive hearing.

*102nd plenary meeting
25 May 2007*



General Assembly

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Sixty-first session
Agenda item 44

Resolution adopted by the General Assembly

[without reference to a Main Committee (A/61/L.11/Rev.2 and Add.1)]

61/221. Promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace

The General Assembly,

Reaffirming the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,¹ in particular the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion,

Recalling its resolutions 56/6 of 9 November 2001, on the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations, 57/6 of 4 November 2002, concerning the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, 57/337 of 3 July 2003, on the prevention of armed conflict, 58/128 of 19 December 2003, on the promotion of religious and cultural understanding, harmony and cooperation, 59/23 of 11 November 2004, on the promotion of interreligious dialogue, 59/143 of 15 December 2004, on the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World, 2001–2010, and 59/199 of 20 December 2004, on the elimination of all forms of religious intolerance,

Underlining the importance of promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship among human beings in all their diversity of religion, belief, culture and language, and recalling that all States have pledged themselves under the Charter to promote and encourage universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion,

Taking note of the adoption of the 2005 World Summit Outcome² in which the Heads of State and Government acknowledged the importance of respect and understanding for religious and cultural diversity, reaffirmed the value of the dialogue on interfaith cooperation and committed themselves to advancing human welfare, freedom and progress everywhere, as well as to encouraging and promoting tolerance, respect, dialogue and cooperation at the local, national, regional and international levels and among different cultures, civilizations and peoples in order to promote international peace and security,

¹ Resolution 217 A (III).

² See resolution 60/1.

Alarmed that serious instances of intolerance and discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, including acts of violence, intimidation and coercion motivated by religious intolerance, are on the increase in many parts of the world and threaten the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

Emphasizing the need, at all levels of society and among nations, for strengthening freedom, justice, democracy, tolerance, solidarity, cooperation, pluralism, respect for diversity of culture and religion or belief, dialogue and understanding, which are important elements for peace, and convinced that the guiding principles of democratic society need to be actively promoted by the international community,

Reaffirming that freedom of expression, media pluralism, multilingualism, equal access to art and to scientific and technological knowledge, including in digital form, and the possibility for all cultures to have access to the means of expression and dissemination are the guarantees of cultural diversity, and that in ensuring the free flow of ideas by word and image, care should be exercised that all cultures can express themselves and make themselves known,

Affirming the need for all States to continue international efforts to enhance dialogue and broaden understanding among civilizations, in an effort to prevent the targeting of different religions and cultures,³ contribute to the peaceful resolution of conflicts and disputes and reduce the potential for animosity, clashes and even violence,

Considering that tolerance for cultural, ethnic, and religious and linguistic diversities, as well as dialogue among and within civilizations, is essential for peace, understanding and friendship among individuals and people of different cultures and nations of the world, while manifestations of cultural prejudice, intolerance and xenophobia towards different cultures and religions may generate hatred and violence among peoples and nations throughout the world,

Recognizing the richness of nomadic civilization and its important contribution to promoting dialogue and interaction among all forms of civilization,

Taking note of the valuable contribution of various initiatives at the national, regional and international levels, such as the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, the Bali Declaration on Building Interfaith Harmony within the International Community,⁴ the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, the Dialogue among Civilizations and Cultures, Enlightened Moderation, the Informal Meeting of Leaders on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace,⁵ the Islam-Christianity Dialogue, the Moscow World Summit of Religious Leaders and the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, which are all mutually inclusive, reinforcing and interrelated,

Mindful that those initiatives identify areas for practical action in all sectors and levels of society for the promotion of interreligious, intercultural and intercivilizational dialogue, understanding and cooperation,

Recognizing the commitment of all religions to peace,

³ As recognized also in Security Council resolution 1624 (2005).

⁴ A/60/254, annex.

⁵ See A/60/383.

1. *Affirms* that mutual understanding and interreligious dialogue constitute important dimensions of the dialogue among civilizations and of the culture of peace;

2. *Takes note with appreciation* of the work of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on interreligious dialogue in the context of its efforts to promote dialogue among civilizations, cultures and peoples, as well as activities related to a culture of peace, and welcomes its focus on concrete action at the global, regional and subregional levels and its flagship project on the promotion of interfaith dialogue;

3. *Recognizes* that respect for religious and cultural diversity in an increasingly globalizing world contributes to international cooperation, promotes enhanced dialogue among religions, cultures and civilizations and helps to create an environment conducive to the exchange of human experience;

4. *Also recognizes* that, despite intolerance and conflicts that are creating a divide across countries and regions and constitute a growing threat to peaceful relations among nations, all cultures, religions and civilizations share a common set of universal values and can all contribute to the enrichment of humankind;

5. *Reaffirms* the solemn commitment of all States to fulfil their obligations to promote universal respect for, and observance and protection of, all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights¹ and other instruments relating to human rights and international law; the universal nature of these rights and freedoms is beyond question;

6. *Urges* States, in compliance with their international obligations, to take all necessary action to combat incitement to or acts of violence, intimidation and coercion motivated by hatred and intolerance based on culture, religion or belief, which may cause discord and disharmony within and among societies;

7. *Also urges* States to take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief in the recognition, exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms in all fields of civil, economic, political, social and cultural life and to make all efforts to enact or rescind legislation, where necessary, in order to prohibit any such discrimination, and to take all appropriate measures to combat intolerance on the grounds of religion or belief;

8. *Reaffirms* that the promotion and protection of the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities contribute to political and social stability and peace and enrich the cultural diversity and heritage of society as a whole in the States in which such persons live, and urges States to ensure that their political and legal systems reflect the multicultural diversity within their societies and, where necessary, to improve democratic and political institutions, organizations and practices so that they are more fully participatory and avoid the marginalization and exclusion of, and discrimination against, specific sectors of society;

9. *Encourages* Governments to promote, including through education, as well as the development of progressive curricula and textbooks, understanding, tolerance and friendship among human beings in all their diversity of religion, belief, culture and language, which will address the cultural, social, economic, political and religious sources of intolerance, and to apply a gender perspective while doing so, in order to promote understanding, tolerance, peace and friendly

relations among nations and all racial and religious groups, recognizing that education at all levels is one of the principal means to build a culture of peace;

10. *Recognizes* the contribution of the media to developing a better understanding among all religions, beliefs, cultures and peoples and to facilitating a dialogue among societies, as well as to creating an environment conducive to the exchange of human experience;

11. *Supports* practical initiatives at the regional and national levels by all parties concerned, including the media representatives themselves, to encourage the media to enhance its capacity in promoting interfaith and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace, development and human dignity;

12. *Encourages* the promotion of dialogue among the media from all cultures and civilizations, emphasizes that everyone has the right to freedom of expression, and reaffirms that the exercise of this right carries with it special duties and responsibilities and may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and necessary for respect of the rights or reputations of others, protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals;

13. *Affirms* that the relevant United Nations bodies, including the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, shall endeavour to undertake coordinated measures to promote universal respect on matters of freedom of religion or belief and cultural diversity and to prevent instances of intolerance, discrimination and incitement of hatred against members of any community or adherents of any religion or belief;

14. *Decides* to convene in 2007 a high-level dialogue on interreligious and intercultural cooperation for the promotion of tolerance, understanding and universal respect on matters of freedom of religion or belief and cultural diversity, in coordination with other similar initiatives in this area;

15. *Decides also* to consider declaring one of the coming years as the Year of Dialogue among Religions and Cultures;

16. *Requests* the Secretary-General to ensure the systematic and organizational follow-up of all interreligious, intercultural and intercivilizational matters within the United Nations system and overall coordination and coherence in its interreligious, intercultural and intercivilizational dialogue and cooperation efforts, inter alia, through the designation of a focal unit in the Secretariat to handle these matters;

17. *Also requests* the Secretary-General to report to the General Assembly at its sixty-second session on the implementation of the present resolution.

*83rd plenary meeting
20 December 2006*



THE PRESIDENT
OF THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

12 September 2007

Excellency,

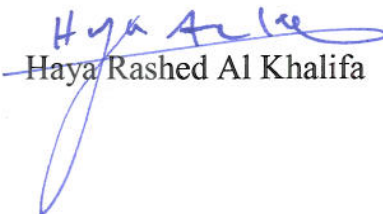
I wish to refer to a letter of the Office of the President of the General Assembly dated 15 August 2007, transmitting a list of proposed speakers, respondents and moderators at the Informal Interactive Hearing of the General Assembly on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, to be held in the afternoon of 4 October 2007 in connection with the High-level Dialogue on 4 and 5 October. In that letter, Member States were kindly requested to consider the list and provide their comments, if any, by Wednesday 29 August 2007.

In this connection, please find enclosed for your information a tentative programme of the High-level Dialogue and the Informal Interactive Hearing with Civil Society, as well as the list of speakers and respondents for the latter.

In order to facilitate discussions at the Informal Interactive Hearing with Civil Society, please find attached a concept paper which I trust will provide useful background information for this event.

Once again, I wish to invite your government to participate at the ministerial or highest possible level, and look forward to your cooperation and active participation.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.


Haya Rashed Al Khalifa

All Permanent Representatives and
Permanent Observers to the United Nations
New York



THE PRESIDENT
OF THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

13 July 2007

Excellency,

I wish to draw your attention to General Assembly resolution 61/221 of 20 December 2006 entitled “Promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace” and General Assembly resolution 61/269 of 25 May 2007 entitled “High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace”.

As you may recall, by these two resolutions the General Assembly decided that the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace would be held on 4 and 5 October 2007, with a plenary meeting on the morning of 4 October, and two plenary meetings on 5 October – one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The theme for the High-level Dialogue is “Interreligious and intercultural cooperation for the promotion of tolerance, understanding and universal respect on matters of freedom of religion or belief and cultural diversity”. Due to the limited time for these meetings, each delegation will be kindly requested to observe the time limit of 7 minutes for each intervention. The list of speakers will be open for inscription with the Secretariat as from Wednesday, 15 August 2007.

The General Assembly further decided to hold an informal interactive hearing with representatives of civil society, including non-governmental organizations and the private sector on the afternoon of 4 October, and that it would be chaired by the President of the General Assembly. In this regard, I am pleased to forward to you an information note, outlining the preparation for this informal interactive hearing, as attached herewith. I will also revert to you once the nomination process for the informal interactive hearing is complete.

Given the importance of the subject matter, I would like to extend my invitation to your government to participate actively in the above-mentioned meetings at the ministerial or highest possible level.

I look forward to your continued support and cooperation in this matter.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Haya Rashed Al Khalifa". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Haya Rashed Al Khalifa

All Permanent Representatives and
Permanent Observers to the United Nations
New York