

“Connecting Communities of Discourse...”

Third Plenary Session
“Government, NGOs and International Institutions

AN INITIATIVE FOR A UNITED NATIONS DECADE
FOR INTERRELIGIOUS AND INTERCULTURAL
DIALOGUE, UNDERSTANDING
AND COOPERATION FOR PEACE

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I start by expressing deep gratitude for the privilege of participating in this International Law and Religion Symposium at Brigham Young University. I also express my admiration for the inspiring leadership and guidance of Prof Cole Durham, Jr. Among his many contributions, he gave invaluable help to the 110 year old international NGO which I represent, the International Association for Religious Freedom, in developing a - still evolving - code of ethics for religious responsibilities to protect and implement the fundamental right for freedom of religion or belief. We cannot claim rights without exercising responsibilities.

In addressing the challenge to “connect”, I understand E.M.Forster’s famous injunction “ONLY CONNECT” to mean that cooperation is essential rather than simple, that dialogue must be intentional and productive rather than automatic or decorative. Too many expressions of goodwill and even solemn conventions of mutual protection have remained dead letters and too many declarations, even the 1981 United Nations Declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief, have received lip service rather than seen implementation.

At the 20th anniversary of that declaration the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the freedom of religion or belief, together with the government of Spain, held an international consultation on religious education in schools as a preventive measure to combat such intolerance and discrimination. NGOs such as the one that I serve helped in the preparation and follow-up of that conference, for example with regional meetings on four continents to promote interfaith learning. We were also encouraged as NGOs in Geneva and NY to strengthen our cooperation around practical measures such as education for tolerance and truthful and respectful approaches to education about the world’s religions, to follow up the Special Rapporteur’s study on the role of religion and cultures on the status of women, and to follow the way in which freedom of religion or belief was – or was not – being taken up in the Universal Periodic Review procedures (a concern which George and Kathryn Jarvis and their interns followed with great diligence and effectiveness).

Building upon such explicit and long-term recognition by a UN body, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, of the relevance of religious dialogue in promoting peace and justice, a number of religious, interreligious and value-based NGOs have been emboldened to seek a more permanent forum within the UN to take up issues of cooperation but also tensions between religions. At the same time the UN has been establishing the Alliance of Civilizations and UNESCO has been emerging from, for too long a time, treating “religion” as a “taboo” subject unless subsumed under “culture”. The time seems propitious to make an intentional bid to write the issue of specifically interreligious and intercultural dialogue more firmly into the UN agenda.

Rather than advocating for a new interreligious advisory commission, forum or programme within UN structures, as had been abortively and perhaps impatiently suggested at the Millennium Spiritual Summit at the UN, the idea has emerged of advocating a UN Decade for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, Understanding and Cooperation for Peace from 2011 to 2020. In 2010 the existing UN Decade for a Culture of Peace for the Children of the World will formally end. Lessons can be learned that such decades should not be simply formal or celebratory but should lead to tripartite cooperation and action by governments, UN agencies and civil society organizations, including religions.

The proposed Decade was already noted in the November 2008 session of the General Assembly and a formal resolution (General Assembly A/RES/63/22) was passed asking governments to examine the idea of a decade (paragraph 8). As we speak, the Secretary General is circulating governments with his report to the forthcoming General Assembly and it is expected that he will refer to the many positive responses which have been received from governments in favour of such a new Decade. It remains to be seen whether a particular government or group of governments will then table a new resolution this year to authorize the launching of such a Decade in 2011 and thereby to provide a framework for enhanced cooperation between governments, UN agencies and civil society organizations. Potential and much needed areas of continuing or new cooperation include implementation of Millennium Development Goals, respect for all human rights (not only the protection of freedom of religion or belief), humanitarian cooperation such as needs of refugees and migrants, addressing population issues, environmental concerns, etc.

So far I have described diplomatic efforts to achieve the designation of a UN Decade. That, however, is not the real goal of the proposal. Already there are tripartite meetings between governments, agencies and NGOs within which religiously based NGOs play a significant part, but long term cooperation rather than competition needs to be focused on specific areas and possibilities for working together. The theme of the last assembly of the Conference of NGOs in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) –CoNGO – was “Moving from Consultation to Partnership”. There are many examples in UN programmes related to refugees, population issues or humanitarian needs where such partnership with NGOs, including religiously based NGOs, is well established but there are other areas of UN work which need a more interactive approach and a more serious and creative consultative relationship with NGOs. Former Secretary General Kofi Annan reminded us frequently that the UN charter is in the name of “We the people” and that the charter itself provides for participation by civil society.

It is for civil society partners, not least in academia and in religious and value-based organizations, to demonstrate their credibility and responsibility for critical accompaniment of a wide range of United Nations programmes. The proposed Decade could be a useful incentive and vehicle for such cooperation and partnership. Even if the time is not seen as ripe for an official UN Decade there may be sufficient energy for civil society organizations to launch their own decade, but I believe that this would mean lost opportunities both for the UN and for themselves. Accordingly it is desirable that the months of October and November 2009 see as much lobbying of governments as is possible, not least in national capitals, to secure already at this year's UN General Assembly sponsorship and adoption of a resolution in favour of a UN Decade for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, Understanding and Cooperation for Peace from 2011 to 2020.

Some academic and religious bodies are not yet accredited either with the Department of Public Information or with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Yet there has been official encouragement not only for international but also for regional and national NGOs to apply for such accreditation and numbers have grown rapidly in recent years. There is a danger that such a generous policy may have allowed accreditation of some organizations that are not truly independent of government control or some groups that are self-serving rather than dedicated to cooperation. But the great majority of civil society NGOs are independent and altruistic, as well as often being very practical in their humanitarian and human rights activities. The proposed Decade could further encourage groups that are working in isolation or even under oppression to find support and to contribute their achievements.

Dialogue, understanding and cooperation require academic preparation and critique but they need not be ends in themselves and can lead to transforming actions of overcoming tensions and prejudices, and even conflict and violence. As the UN and its member governments, sometimes belatedly, make explicit recognition of the relevance of religion and culture – for both good and bad – in building peace and justice, it is vital that the adherents of religions and cultures should themselves demonstrate a readiness to be self-critical about obstructions and oppressions perpetrated in both past and present, often against the very precepts they preach or the values they purport to promote. But as well as self criticism there can also be a confidence and determination to work together, to do better together what we have so long done separately.

In this brief presentation I have emphasized diplomatic possibilities and the need for lobbying by NGOs and individuals. I also wish to share information about other NGO initiatives including the formation of a coalition of international religious, interreligious and value-based NGOs. Representatives of some 60 such bodies have met over the last two years in Geneva and New York with a number of governments' and United Nations agencies' representatives present as participatory observers. The necessary funding has come from a wide range of different faith-based organizations. Some 30 such organizations have already made formal engagements to support the coalition and they will meet again just before the Parliament of the World's Religions in Melbourne in December 2009. If the United Nations General Assembly has already passed a supportive resolution, that will be a great moment to launch the proposed Decade.

Finally, I draw your attention to the website of the coalition: www.faithdecadeforpeace.net where you may find more details of this timely and challenging proposal.