

THE TANDEM PROJECT

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UNITED NATIONS, HUMAN RIGHTS, FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

HOW CLOSE ARE WE TO INCLUSIVE & GENUINE DIALOGUE ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

Issue: How close are we to Inclusive and Genuine Dialogue on Freedom of Religion or Belief?

For: United Nations, Governments, Religions or Beliefs, Academia, NGOs, Media, Civil Society

Review: The three articles in this review is a measure of how close we are to inclusive and genuine dialogue on freedom of religion or belief: *Saudi Arabia Seeks UN Platform to Promote Pluralism Abroad; A flustered flock of pigeons: how to talk to Muslims (and others) Catholics Seem Unsure; Muslim-Christian Dialogue Catholics and Muslims Pledge to Improve Links.*

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, at the Alliance of Civilizations Madrid Forum said; “never in our lifetime has there been a more desperate need for constructive and committed dialogue, among individuals, among communities, among cultures, among and between nations.” Another writer in a different setting said, “the warning signs are clear: unless we establish genuine dialogue within and among all kinds of belief, ranging from religious fundamentalism to secular dogmatism, the conflicts of the future will probably be even more deadly.”

As we are all painfully aware, religious conflict continues to escalate worldwide whether in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Africa, South Asia, East Asia or the Americas. Acceptance of the rights of others to their own beliefs continues to be a value denied for millions of people. Much suffering is inflicted in the name of religion or belief on minorities, women and children and “the other” for the most part by perpetrators in total disregard for the tenets of their own faiths.

Did God create us or did we create God? This question calls for inclusive and genuine dialogue, respectful and thoughtful responses, discussion of taboos and clarity by persons of diverse beliefs. Inclusive and genuine is dialogue between people of *theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief.* These UN categories are embodied in international law to promote tolerance and prevent discrimination based on religion or belief.

Inclusive and genuine dialogue is essential as a first step to understanding the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; *recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.* The leaders of religious and non-religious beliefs sanction the truth claims of their own traditions. They are the key to raising awareness and acceptance of how to respectfully hold truth claims in tandem with human rights standards on freedom of religion or belief.

The challenge is to reconcile international human rights standards on freedom of religion or belief with the truth claims of religious and non-religious beliefs.

Surely one of the best hopes for the future of humankind is to embrace a culture in which religions and other beliefs accept one another, in which wars and violence are not tolerated in the name of an exclusive right to truth, in which children are raised to solve conflicts with mediation, compassion and understanding.

Excerpts: Excerpts are presented under the Eight Articles of the 1981 U.N. Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

Examples of extracts are presented prior to an *Issue Statement* for each Review.

1. 1 *Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have a religion or whatever belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practices and teaching.*

1. 2. *No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have a religion or belief of his choice.*

1. 3 *Freedom to manifest one's religion or belief may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.*

SAUDI ARABIA SEEKS U.N. PLATFORM TO PROMOTE PLURALISM ABROAD

By Neil MacFarquhar, New York Times, November 12, 2008.

UNITED NATIONS — Saudi Arabia, which deploys a special police force to ensure that a narrow sect of Islam predominates in the kingdom, is sponsoring a discussion at the United Nations on religious tolerance starting Wednesday.

More than a dozen world leaders are scheduled to attend the meeting, including President Bush; the British prime minister, Gordon Brown; the Israeli president, Shimon Peres; and the heads of seven Arab states. King Abdullah, the Saudi monarch, and Mr. Peres were both expected as guests of Ban Ki-moon, the secretary general, at a dinner Tuesday night, a rare chance for an encounter.

The United Nations avoids religious discussions, so the two-day session of the General Assembly is officially being labeled as a meeting about the “culture of peace.” Most of those attending are political rather than religious figures.

But human rights groups are crying foul that Saudi Arabia is being given a platform to promote religious tolerance abroad while actively combating it at home.

“It’s like apartheid South Africa having a conference at the U.N. on racial harmony,” said Ali al-Ahmed, a Shiite Muslim dissident from Saudi Arabia based in Washington.

Human Rights Watch issued a statement calling on Saudi Arabia to start the fight against religious intolerance at home by ending “systemic religious discrimination.”

The position taken by Western leaders, including Mr. Bush, is that any attempt by the leader of a Muslim state to promote tolerance, especially one as influential as Saudi Arabia, merits support. Mr. Bush is due to address the session on Thursday.

A flustered flock of pigeons

How to talk to Muslims (and others); Catholics seem unsure
The Economist, January 26th 2008

When 138 Muslim scholars sent an open request to leaders of the Christian world, from Catholics to Methodists, for a theological dialogue, they knew they were setting a cat among the pigeons. It was a fair bet that senior Christians would soon be looking over each other's shoulders, anxious not to be too liberal or too harsh in their reply.

And something like that has happened. America's Southern Baptists have blamed mainstream Protestants for responding to warmly; and even the usually well-organized Catholics have been less than coordinated. The Vatican's point man on inter-faith relations, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, initially saw little scope for talking to Muslims about theology. But Pope Benedict XVI later agreed to receive some of the Muslim signatories. That process will start soon.

Easily the boldest Catholic response to the Muslim letter has been an essay by an Australian Jesuit scholar, Daniel Madigan, published this month. He took seriously the Muslim idea of a dialogue based on the commands of Jesus of Nazareth to love God and one another.

Important as these commands were, they were not the basis of the Christian faith: God's love for man was a more basic point, the Jesuit argued. But for all his quibbles, he did engage with the Muslims' theological views in earnest.

As the largest of the Catholic Church's religious orders, the Jesuits like to test the limits of dialogue. Before his death in 2004, a Jesuit pioneer of Catholic thinking on Hinduism, Jacques Dupuis, suffered many scolding from the Vatican's doctrinal enforcer: then called Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger; now pope.

The Jesuits' new superior-general, elected this month, also exemplifies the order's belief in living "at the frontiers" of culture: like another recent holder of that office (who fell out badly with the Vatican bigwigs). Adolfo Nicolas is a Spanish expert on Japan. He takes office in interesting ecumenical times.

CATHOLICS AND MUSLIMS PLEDGE TO IMPROVE LINKS

New York Times, by Rachel Donadio, November 7, 2008.

VATICAN CITY – Catholic and Muslim leaders worked on Thursday to deflate suspicion between their two faiths, pledging at a high-level seminar here to work together to condemn terrorism, protect religious freedom and fight poverty.

The meeting came a year after 138 Muslim leaders wrote a letter to Pope Benedict XVI after he offended many Muslims by quoting a Byzantine emperor who called some

teachings of the Prophet Muhammad “evil and inhuman.” In turn, top Vatican officials have worried about freedom of worship in majority-Muslim countries, as well as immigration that is turning Europe, which they define as a Christian continent, increasingly Muslim.

But on Thursday both sides said they hoped that the seminar would open a new and much-improved chapter in Catholic-Muslim relations, as the two groups said they might establish a committee that could ease tensions in any future crisis between the two religions.

“Let us resolve to overcome past prejudices and to correct the often distorted images of the other, which even today can create difficulties in our relations,” Benedict told the Muslim delegation. He called the gathering “a clear sign of our mutual esteem and our desire to listen respectfully to one another.”

Addressing the pope on behalf of the Muslim delegation, Seyyed Hossein Nasr of Iran, a professor of Islamic studies at George Washington University in Washington, said that throughout history, “various political forces” of both Christians and Muslims had carried out violence.

“Certainly we cannot claim that violence is the monopoly of only one religion,” he said.

The three-day forum brought together nearly 30 Catholic clerics and scholars, led by Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, the head of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue; and as many Muslim clerics and scholars, led by Mustafa Ceric, the Grand Mufti of Bosnia and Herzegovina based in Sarajevo.

The meeting “exceeded our expectations,” said Ingrid Mary Mattson, the director of the Islamic Society of North America and a professor of Islamic studies at the Hartford Seminary.

“The atmosphere was very good, very frank,” said Tariq Ramadan, a professor of Islamic Studies at Oxford University. A celebrated intellectual in Europe, Mr. Ramadan in 2004 was denied a visa to the United States on the grounds that he had donated to two European charities that the State Department later said gave money to Hamas.

Mr. Ramadan said the thorniest questions the group tackled were “apostasy” and “freedom of worship in a minority situation.” Some Muslims believe it is apostasy to convert out of Islam.

The 15-point declaration the group issued on Thursday did not address issues of conversion.

It called on Catholics and Muslims to renounce “oppression, aggressive violence and terrorism especially that committed in the name of religion.”

And it said religious minorities should be “entitled to their own places of worship, and their founding figures and symbols they consider sacred should not be subjected to any form of mockery or ridicule.”

In 2006, Muslims around the world protested, some violently, after a Danish newspaper printed cartoons of Muhammad.

One participant, Archbishop Louis Sako of Kirkuk in northern Iraq, called the meeting “a first step,” but said he hoped that the declaration would “bear fruit.”

In recent years, Islamic militants in Kirkuk have killed, kidnapped or forced Iraqi Christians to convert. Archbishop Sako noted that in their homilies, “many imams are preaching against infidels and crusaders,” and that “some simple people” believed that this referred to all Christians.

He called on Muslim leaders to publicize the declaration, with its assertion of shared Christian-Muslim values. “This should be clarified, stated, given to the media to teach people about it,” he said. “For us Christians living in Muslim countries, that would be very, very helpful.”

The Muslim delegation included representatives of Sunni and Shiite Islam, as well as several converts and participants from North Africa, Indonesia, the Philippines and Uganda.

It notably did not include any participants from Saudi Arabia, where non-Muslim worship is not tolerated and with which the Vatican has had strained ties. Two Saudis were expected to attend, but had to cancel at the last minute for health reasons, said Ibrahim Kalin of Turkey, a spokesman for the Muslim delegation and a professor of Islamic Studies at Georgetown University in Washington.

Yet in July, Cardinal Tauran and other Vatican officials attended an interfaith dialogue organized by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in Spain.

Participants in this week’s conference pledged to hold another dialogue in a Muslim country in 2010.

ISSUE STATEMENT: International Human Rights Standards on Freedom of Religion or Belief are international law and universal codes of conduct for peaceful cooperation, respectful competition and resolution of conflicts. The standards are a platform for inclusive and genuine dialogue on core principles and values within and among nations, all religions and other beliefs.

STANDARDS: http://www.tandemproject.com/program/81_dec.htm

The Tandem Project: a non-governmental organization founded in 1986 to build understanding, tolerance and respect for diversity, and to prevent discrimination in matters relating to freedom of religion or belief. The Tandem Project, a non-profit NGO, has sponsored multiple conferences, curricula, reference materials and programs on Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion - and 1981 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

The Tandem Project initiative is the result of a co-founder representing the World Federation of United Nations Associations at the United Nations Geneva Seminar, *Encouragement of Understanding, Tolerance and Respect in Matters Relating to Freedom of Religion or Belief*, called by the UN Secretariat in 1984 on ways to implement the 1981 UN Declaration. In 1986, The Tandem Project organized the first NGO International Conference on the 1981 UN Declaration.

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*The Tandem Project is a UN NGO in Special Consultative Status with the
Economic and Social Council of the United Nations*

Goal: To eliminate all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief.

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, at the Alliance of Civilizations Madrid Forum said; “never in our lifetime has there been a more desperate need for constructive and committed dialogue, among individuals, among communities, among cultures, among and between nations.” Another writer in different setting said; “the warning signs are clear, unless we establish genuine dialogue within and among all kinds of belief, ranging from religious fundamentalism to secular dogmatism, the conflicts of the future will probably be even more deadly.”

Challenge: to reconcile international human rights standards on freedom of religion or belief with the truth claims of religious and non-religious beliefs.

Did God create us or did we create God? This question calls for inclusive and genuine dialogue, respectful and thoughtful responses, discussion of taboos and clarity by persons of diverse beliefs. Inclusive and genuine is dialogue between people of *theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief*. These UN categories embodied in international law promote tolerance and prevent discrimination based on religion or belief.

Inclusive and genuine dialogue is essential as a first step in recognition of the inherent dignity, equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family, and a foundation for freedom, justice and peace in the world. Leaders of religious and non-religious beliefs sanction the truth claims of their own traditions. They are the key to raising awareness and acceptance of the value of holding truth claims in tandem with human rights standards on freedom of religion or belief.

To build understanding and support for Article 18, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion - and the 1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Encourage the United Nations, Governments, Religions or Beliefs, Academia, NGOs, Media and Civil Society to use International Human Rights Standards on Freedom of Religion or Belief as essential for *long-term solutions* to conflicts in all matters relating to religion or belief.

Objectives:

1. Use International Human Rights Standards on Freedom of Religion or Belief as a platform for genuine dialogue on the core principles and values within and among nations, all religions and other beliefs.
2. Adapt these human rights standards to early childhood education, teaching children, from the very beginning, that their own religion is one out of many and that it is a personal choice for everyone to adhere to the religion or belief by which he or she feels most inspired, or to adhere to no religion or belief at all.¹

History: In 1968 the United Nations deferred work on an International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Religious Intolerance, because of its apparent complexity and sensitivity. In the twenty-first century, a dramatic increase of intolerance and discrimination on grounds of religion or belief is motivating a worldwide search to find solutions to these problems. This is a challenge calling for enhanced dialogue by States and others; including consideration of an International Convention on Freedom of Religion or Belief for protection of and accountability by all religions or beliefs. The tensions in today’s world inspire a question such as:

Should the United Nations adopt an International Convention on Freedom of Religion or Belief?

Response: Is it the appropriate moment to reinstate the drafting of a legally binding international convention on freedom of religion or belief? Law making of this nature requires a minimum consensus and an environment that appeals to reason rather than emotions. At the same time we are on a learning curve as the various dimensions of the Declaration are being explored. Many academics have produced voluminous books on these questions but more ground has to be prepared before setting up of a UN working group on drafting a convention. In my opinion, we should not try to rush the elaboration of a Convention on Freedom of Religion or Belief, especially not in times of high tensions and unpreparedness. - *UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Asma Jahangir, Prague 25 Year Anniversary Commemoration of the 1981 UN Declaration, 25 November 2006.*

Option: After forty years this may be the time, however complex and sensitive, for the United Nations Human Rights Council to appoint an Open-ended Working Group to draft a United Nations Convention on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The mandate for an Open-ended Working Group ought to assure nothing in a draft Convention will be construed as restricting or derogating from any right defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants on Human Rights, and the 1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

Separation of Religion or Belief and State

Concept: *Separation of Religion or Belief and State - SOROBAS.* The First Preamble to the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads; “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. This concept suggests States recalling their history, culture and constitution adopt fair and equal human rights protection for all religions or beliefs as described in General Comment 22 on Article 18, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, UN Human Rights Committee, 20 July 1993 (CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4):

Article 18: protects *theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief.* The terms belief and religion are to be broadly construed. Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with international characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions. The Committee therefore views with concern any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reasons, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility by a predominant religious community.

Article 18: permits restrictions to manifest a religion or belief only if such limitations are prescribed by law and necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

Dialogue: International Human Rights Standards on Freedom or Religion or Belief are international law and universal codes of conduct for peaceful cooperation, respectful competition and resolution of conflicts. The standards are a platform for genuine dialogue on core principles and values within and among nations, all religions and other beliefs.

Education: Ambassador Piet de Klerk addressing the Prague 25 Year Anniversary Commemoration of the 1981 U.N. Declaration said; “Our educational systems need to provide children with a broad orientation: from the very beginning, children should be taught that their own religion is one out of many and that it is a personal choice for everyone to adhere to the religion or belief by which he or she feels most inspired, or to adhere to no religion or belief at all.”¹

1981 U.N. Declaration on Freedom of Religion or Belief

5.2: Every child shall enjoy the right to have access to education in the matter of religion or belief in accordance with the wishes of his parents, and shall not be compelled to receive teaching on religion or belief against the wishes of his parents, the best interests of the child being the guiding principle.” With International Human Rights safeguards, early childhood education is the best time to begin to build tolerance, understanding and respect for freedom of religion or belief.

5.3: The child shall be protected from any form of discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. He shall be brought up in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, and friendship among peoples, peace and universal brotherhood, respect for the freedom of religion or belief of others and in full consciousness that his energy and talents should be devoted to the service of his fellow men.