

Appendix II

UNESCO Programme for Inter-faith Dialogue

The aim of the UNESCO programme for inter-faith dialogue (launched by Morocco under the title of 'Roads to Faith' and approved in 1995 by the General Conference) is to promote dialogue between the different religions and spiritual traditions in a world of potential conflict within and between religions due to ignorance and misunderstanding of the spiritual traditions and culture of 'others'.

The programme is conceived as an essential dimension of intercultural dialogue. Its main concern is to bring together different religions and spiritual traditions to raise awareness of how close their values are and with a view to engaging them in dialogue. Formal declarations have been adopted with this in mind on the occasion of meetings organized by UNESCO. The Organization has always striven to bring together eminent religious figures from the monotheisms or world spiritual traditions, as well as lay intellectuals recognized for their thought and research in the area of religion (historians, historians of religion, anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, etc.).

Colloquia

The 'Roads to Faith' project was launched at the Rabat meeting (June 1995) at which experts from the three Abrahamic monotheisms wrote some 'Proposals'. Though the central theme of that first meeting was the symbolic and spiritual place of present-day Jerusalem, a need was felt to widen the dialogue to the other spiritual traditions. Thus the Malta meeting in 1997 included participants representing the Buddhist, Sikh and other Eastern traditions. The declaration adopted on that occasion emphasized the convergence of views and values in respect for enriching differences.

The regional setting of the inter-faith dialogue is essential, since it is in a common geographical and historical space that the memory of experiences of conflict or community is forged. Such is the case for the Central Asian region – a crossroads of civilizations and spiritual traditions emerging from 70 years of atheistic materialism. In 1999 at Bishkek, Kirghizstan, the region welcomed the 'Religions and Cultures in Central Asia' Forum, and in 2000 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, it hosted the International

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Conference of Inter-faith Dialogue and for a Culture of Peace. This conference was followed by a workshop on Sufism and inter-faith dialogue in Bukhara, acknowledging the place that this mystical branch of Islam holds in the spiritual and cultural life overarching various Muslim countries.

Positioning in this sensitive region continued with a conference on the theme of 'Science and Spirituality along the Silk Roads' in September 2002 in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Other geographical areas were explored, such as West Africa where severe tension between or within religions is resulting in latent or open conflict: a meeting was held at Abuja in December 2003 which tackled the problematic of conflict resolution and the role of religious leaders in stemming the AIDS pandemic. This year the Asian Pacific region has been the centre of attention, with an inter-faith dialogue meeting scheduled to take place in Sydney in November 2004.

Teaching inter-faith dialogue

The final declarations, proposals and documents adopted at the meetings have stressed the need to promote the educational dimension of inter-faith dialogue, which is a priority for UNESCO. This involves teaching young people the values of respect for others with a view to coexistence in plural societies. This teaching is based on two aims: promoting the reciprocal recognition of religions and spiritual traditions from a comparative, multidisciplinary perspective, and encouraging the study of past and present interactions. The forms this teaching takes will vary according to a given country and educational system. Together with the International Catholic Centre UNESCO disseminated a questionnaire on this teaching: it is appropriate to discover what experiments are carried out in this area in order to produce relevant teaching tools. The results of that study led to a report that set out international and inter-regional educational policies (Paris, September 1999 and June 2001).

Similarly, on the basis of recommendations adopted at the meetings mentioned above, it was decided to create a network of 'UNESCO Chairs in Scriptures, spiritual traditions and their particular cultures'. Set up in university centres with recognized experience in this area, they bring together teachers and researchers specializing in the history of religion who are involved in inter-faith dialogue. This network will facilitate movement of students (including those who intend to enter religious life) so that they may benefit from an education that is lay, multi-religious and inter-cultural. A first meeting of all the Chairs took place in Bucharest in 2001 in order to set up a network (UNITWIN) for joint research, publication of a brochure and creation of a website; student movement has already begun. A meeting of European Chairs took place in Graz, European Capital in 2003 – in the context of the 'Cities of Europe and inter-faith dialogue' project – jointly organized by Graz University, the Austrian government, the Styrian region and Austrian NGOs. A meeting of Central Asian Chairs on the same model is planned for 2005.

Interdisciplinary research/horizontal themes

The tragic events of 11 September 2001 and the ongoing conflict in some parts of the world encourage UNESCO to play a prominent role as a forum for dialogue and exchange with a view to lasting and far-reaching action on geo-strategic issues. In this sense, inter-faith dialogue, seen as an essential dimension between cultures and civilizations, responds to the issues facing society and international relations. It considers terrorism, the rise of fundamentalisms and hardening of identity claims, a theme that will be among those addressed in Sydney in 2004. It facilitates ethical debates around science in general (Almaty colloquium, 2002), and genetics or diseases such as AIDS (Abuja, December 2003). In the same way dialogue is unthinkable without consideration of the right to belief and conscience (UNESCO meeting, January 2001), on western Europe (another one is planned for eastern Europe towards the end of 2004), related to the question of secularism, a Eurocentric concept that needs to be analysed in association with other cultures' sensitivities. The concern is to establish religious pluralism and respect for the convictions of both believers and non-believers. In this regard UNESCO has always emphasized the awareness of religion as a factor in the understanding of social and human realities, as well as the arts and other expressions of the spirit. Lack of religious culture leads to ignorance and therefore intolerance of what is misunderstood.

However, a 'one-dimensional' culture and education that relies exclusively on a single religious truth and beliefs may also lead to all kinds of rigidities of identity and nationalist or ideological restrictions. In this context religion may be 'instrumentalized' or 'manipulated' for political ends, destroying social cohesion. UNESCO is concerned that religious leaders of whatever provenance, together with the other agents of civil society, should work together towards common goals such as durable development, the search for peace, the struggle for fundamental freedoms and rights, even if there has to be a debate on the very concept of the universality of human rights (including the right to believe or not).

It is important to consider those people who feel in some respects doubly marginalized: women, young people and the handicapped. Meetings have been organized to accustom them to debates and exchanges; and it was realized that dialogue between the various confessions has a lot to gain from this (Jamboree – Thailand, 2002; Amman, 2000).

Finally the perception of religion as a factor in social cohesion has to be achieved with the contribution of the media: an initiation into the topic of religion aimed at them has recently begun at Geneva University, in collaboration with the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* and the support of the Swiss National Commission (indeed it is more necessary than ever, in order to eliminate stereotypes and old or new ignorance, to take care to avoid connotations or shorthand in religious matters).

As a component of intercultural dialogue, inter-faith dialogue should be seen as a wide concept. It should call on diverse disciplines, with the support and collaboration of UNESCO sectors, without ignoring the considerable contribution of specialized NGOs and participating universities.

As a concrete example of the synergy to be achieved, the Indigenous Peoples Programme is inclined to prefer to carry out activities aimed at so-called 'primary'

spiritualities. On the other hand this programme can benefit from contributions from inter-faith dialogue that incorporate these peoples and their spiritualities. Such was the case with the Intercultural Dialogue in Central Asia Programme, in which shamanisms were considered, and in Africa, where ancestral traditions remain little understood. Similarly, at the 2004 Australian meeting, a round table will be devoted to Pacific island aborigines and their spiritualities.

For, even though inter-faith dialogue has begun with the Abrahamic religions, it is nevertheless open to any humanistic strand of thought because, in the final analysis, it is about the search for common ethical values to be discovered, shared and transmitted, in the respect of differences seen as enriching and not divisive factors. In this sense any tendency to make claims for a 'community', for example, is to be avoided as far as possible.

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