



General Assembly

Distr.: General
25 February 2011

English only

Human Rights Council

Sixteenth session

Agenda item 3

Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Joint written statement* submitted by New Humanity, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status, the Associazione Comunita Papa Giovanni XXIII, the Association Points-Coeur, the Dominicans for Justice and Peace - Order of Preachers, the International Catholic Child Bureau, the International Institute of Mary Our Help of the Salesians of Don Bosco, the International Organization for the Right to Education and Freedom of Education (OIDE), the International Volunteerism Organization for Women, Education and Development (VIDES), the Teresian Association, the World Union of Catholic Women's Organization, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[14 February 2011]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Freedom of religion is a fundamental path to peace**

The Association Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII, the Association Points-Coeur, Dominicans for Justice and Peace (Order of Preachers), the International Catholic Child Bureau, the International Institute of Mary Our Help of the Salesians of Don Bosco, the International Organization for the Right to Education and Freedom of Education, the International Volunteerism Organization for Women, Education and Development, New Humanity, the Teresian Association, and the World Union of Catholic Women's Organization¹, welcome the report of Mr. Heiner Bielefeldt, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and appreciates the human rights based approach of its recommendations.

Religious freedom is an issue of the utmost relevance, that is still subjected throughout the world to innumerable violations. Despite past tragedies and the efforts of States, international and regional organizations, non-governmental organizations and the many men and women of good will who daily work to protect fundamental rights and freedoms, today's world witnesses a massive display of religious intolerance that, with different expressions and in different social-political contexts, undermines peaceful coexistence and prevents progress and the building of stable peace among peoples and nations.

At present, Christians are the religious group which suffers most from persecution because of their faith. The reprehensible attack against the Syro-Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Baghdad, where on 31 October 2010 two Catholic priests and over fifty faithful were killed as they gathered for the celebration of Holy Mass and the bombing in Alexandria of Egypt, on 1st January 2011, that killed 21 Coptic Christians and injured another 70, are dramatic examples of the persecution of Christians. Followers of other religions or beliefs equally suffer intolerance and discrimination too all around the world: the suicidal attacks in the Karbala Gambay Shah (Pakistan) of September 2010, which killed 29 persons and injured another 200, is only one of all the examples that it is possible to recall. But, particularly in Asia and in Africa, the chief victims of such intolerance are members of religious minorities, who are prevented from freely professing or changing their religion by forms of intimidation and the violation of their rights, basic freedoms and essential goods, including the loss of personal freedom and life itself. In some areas of the world it is impossible to profess one's religion freely except at the risk of life and personal liberty, while in other areas there are more subtle and sophisticated forms of prejudice and hostility towards believers and religious symbols.

Freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right enshrined in a number of international treaties and declarations. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in article 18: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

The right to freedom of religion is affirmed also in article 18 (1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which is a legally binding document of international law. This right encompasses freedom of thought on all matters and the freedom to manifest religion and belief individually or with others, in public or in private. Furthermore, the right to freedom of religion is supported by the right to non-discrimination on the grounds of religion, contained in article 26 of the ICCPR and by article 20 of the

** International Catholic of Geneva, an NGO without consultative status, also shares the views expressed in this statement.

¹ In collaboration with the International Catholic Centre of Geneva.

ICCPR, which prohibits by law any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.

In addition, article 12 of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families has a similar wording to article 18 of the ICCPR. Many of the specialised conventions of the UN and the ILO prohibit discrimination on the grounds of religion, like the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (art. 1) and the UN Convention against Racial Discrimination (art. 5).

The right to religious freedom is rooted in the dignity of the human person, whose transcendent nature must not be ignored or overlooked. When religious freedom is acknowledged, the dignity of the human person is respected at its root, and the ethos and institutions of peoples are strengthened. On the other hand, whenever religious freedom is denied, and attempts are made to hinder people from professing their religion or faith and living accordingly, human dignity is offended, with a resulting threat to justice and peace.

In a globalised world marked by increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, religions can serve as an important factor of unity and peace for the human family. Based on their religious convictions and their reasoned pursuit of the common good, their followers are called to give responsible expression to their commitment within a context of religious freedom. In fact, all religions teach that people should learn to be less selfish and willing to share, that each should live ethically so as to enjoy peace of mind, and follow the Golden Rule: “treat others as you would be treated”. Amid the variety of religious cultures, there is a need to value those elements, which foster civil coexistence, while rejecting whatever is contrary to the dignity of men and women.

As Pope Benedict XVI said: “Religious freedom expresses what is unique about the human person, for it allows us to direct our personal and social life to God, in whose light the identity, meaning and purpose of the person are fully understood. To deny or arbitrarily restrict this freedom is to foster a reductive vision of the human person; to eclipse the public role of religion is to create a society which is unjust, inasmuch as it fails to take account of the true nature of the human person; it is to stifle the growth of the authentic and lasting peace of the whole human family. Religious freedom is not the exclusive patrimony of believers, but of the whole family of the earth’s peoples. It is an essential element of a constitutional state; it cannot be denied without at the same time encroaching on all fundamental rights and freedoms. [...] It is the litmus test for the respect of all the other human rights”².

Religion can offer a precious contribution for the building of a just and peaceful social order at the national and international levels and is an authentic instrument of peace.

According to international law, governments have an obligation to ensure the religious freedom of their people and not to allow or tolerate religious or antireligious fanaticism.

Hence, the undersigned NGOs wish to make the following recommendations:

1. In order to foster a climate of religious tolerance, political and religious leaders should take a human rights-based approach and clearly affirm the importance of the right to freedom of religion or belief in all its dimensions;
2. Concerned UN bodies and agencies should guarantee an impartial monitoring on the situation related to freedom of religion in the different countries, and cooperate with NGOs of recognized competence in this field;

² Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January 2011

3. Member States should respect legal standards that are compatible with art 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights law pertaining to freedom of religion, freedom of expression and the principles of tolerance and non-discrimination;

4. Member States should report on a regular basis to the Universal Periodic Review and to the monitoring Treaty Bodies the violations of the right of freedom of religion in their country and the progress and achievements made in protecting such a right;

5. Member States and other concerned stakeholders should promote awareness raising campaigns to inform civil society on the content and consequences of article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as a contribution to education for peace and the role of religions in building up the human family.
