

SOVEREIGN MILITARY ORDER OF MALTA

Intervention of
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to the
International Consultative Conference on School Education
in relation to Freedom of Religion or Belief, Tolerance
and
Non-Discrimination
Madrid, 25 November 2001

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Heads of Delegations, Delegates, Observers, Expert Conferees and Participants of this International Consultative Conference on School Education in relation to Freedom of Religion or Belief, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination --Please allow me to add my congratulations to our host country and the Government of Spain, the organizers of this important International Consultative Conference, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Madame Mary Robinson and the Preparatory Committee. I would be remiss, however, if I did not pay special tribute to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief, Mr. Abdelfattah Amor, whose hard work and dedication has been an inspiration to all concerned with the complex and sensitive subjects of this Conference. Thank you Mr. Amor.

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The second paragraph of the Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 10 December 1948 in pertinent part states:

“Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of *speech and belief* and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,”(emphasis added)

Only with the Electronic Revolution in second half of the Twentieth Century, did the powerful contemporary process of globalization actually begin. While initially human consciousness of the new phenomenon of globalization focused primarily on globally interacting economic and ecological processes, and secondarily on globally interacting political and military processes, now at the dawn of the Twenty-first Century we face the inescapable and expanding reality of a globally interacting religious processes. In this context, the present concern about the education of children becomes paramount.

Until the advent of globalization, the great world religions could live fairly compartmentalized in separated geographic regions of the planet. In some places, the presence of various religious traditions would overlap across national boundaries, but this was an exception. At certain times, their encounter became tragically violent, as various faith traditions even supported military conflicts that followed religious lines.

Today, however, as the entire planet is rightfully perceived as one fragile ecosystem, and as new technologies of violence threaten to do far greater social and ecological damage than ever before imagined, we hear fresh voices calling for human solidarity. We hear from UNESCO wise calls for a promotion of a global culture of peace and tolerance. We hear from the United Nations Sub Commission and Commission on

Human Rights haunting calls to ground a culture of peace and tolerance in universal recognition of human rights. In addition, we hear from all organs and committees of the entire United Nations profound calls to undertake a dialogue among civilizations.

Each of these calls speaks noble messages to the great religious traditions of the human family, and particularly to their foundational role in educating humanity's precious children. The world's religious traditions carry a special responsibility to promote among the children whom they educate a heightened sense of the need for a global culture of peace, tolerance and non-discrimination, of the need for global defense of human rights, and of the need for on-going dialogue among religions, civil society and nation states of the worlds' civilizations.

In regard to this last point of the dialogue among civilizations, the great historian of civilizations, the late Arnold Toynbee, long ago pointed out that the deepest energy of any civilization is always spiritual. Further, another great historian of civilizations, the late Christopher Dawson, added to Toynbee's analysis the insight that civilizations continue to flourish only when they take on new energy from immigrant groups, who bring gifts from yet other civilizations. When civilizations fail to open themselves to outside human energy, Dawson claimed, those civilizations lose their creativity, experience atrophy, and become rigid – like a human body that has lost its very life principle.

Hence if there is to be a dialogue among civilizations, it will of necessity become a dialogue among world religions, and in turn a dialogue of mutual influence. Again, school education is foundational to this dialogue, for it forms the consciousness of the future generations.

In this process, however, it is important not to collapse into the philosophical relativism and indifferentism that certain sectors of the modern West have attempted to impose on the new planetary culture. Often these voices of relativism and indifferentism, themselves proceeding from secular and sometimes even anti-religious assumptions, claim that all religions are equal and not really different from each other. But if that were the case, there would be no meaning to humanity's diverse and rich pluralism of religious traditions. All could be collapsed into a vague and rather empty common religion, which, I propose, would satisfy little the human search for truth and the actual spiritual yearnings of the human heart.

Rather, as world religions enter into dialogue with each other, they need not put aside each of their unique claims to truth. The basis of their dialogue should not be relativism or indifference, but rather a profound respect for the human person and for the freedom of conscience of each person. One can simultaneously hold firmly to the truth as one perceives and follows it, even religious truth, and at the same time embrace and welcome the other who claims to perceive and follow a different truth. One may do that by distinguishing between one's firm commitment to the truth as one holds it, and one's sense of hospitality to and reverence for the other as a human person full of dignity grounded in freedom, and particularly religious freedom.

We may and should hold firmly the truth as we know it, but we also need to welcome generously the other who claims to hold a different truth. Even should we believe in our heart that the "truth" which the other claims is in fact an "error," that need not diminish our respect and openness to the person whom we judge to hold an "erroneous" position. In fact, our respect for the person of the other requires that we show

generous hospitality even when we judge the other to be in “error.” Our respect for the other is not grounded in the intellectual or religious position that the other holds, but solely in the inherent human dignity of the other.

And so, out of hospitable mutual respect, we not only honor the other but also willingly enter into dialogue. We seek to learn about the other’s experience, even about the other’s religious experience. Thus we share stories, celebrate our common freedom, and yet do not compromise our own unique identity and commitment.

This same process of hospitable sharing among religious traditions needs also to occur within the framework of primary and secondary education, and also at the level of tertiary education. In this new era of globalization, children and youth in general need to learn about the many religious traditions of the human family. In learning about these traditions, their own religious tradition need not be relativized, but only contextualized. One can simultaneously be firm and clear about one’s own identity, including religious identity, and at the same time truly welcome as guests those of other identities.

This is particularly true with regard to the educational formation of children. Children can be supportively formed in their own religious traditions, and simultaneously be opened magnanimously to other religious traditions.

Against this merged horizon of truth and hospitality, it becomes a special challenge for legislation and legal codes, including when legal codes claim religious roots, for example, the Canon Law of the Catholic Church, to assist societies, schools, and families in bringing to religious education the mutually enhancing processes of formation in one’s own religious tradition and hospitable opening to all other religious traditions.

Only when one or more generations of children across the world's diverse cultures are so educated in a mutuality of respect for truth and otherness will we find emerging an authentic global culture of peace and tolerance, an authentic global celebration of human rights as universal, and an authentic global dialogue of civilizations. This is the challenge of the third millennium, and it ²must be achieved in our ever-increasing globalizing world.

² Special thanks to Professor Dr. Edward "Joe" Holland, President Pax Romana, Catholic Movement for Intellectual & Cultural Affairs (CMIC-USA, Inc.) a colleague and friend, for his substantial and critical scholarly contributions to this presentation.