



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Executive Board

Hundred and seventy-sixth session

176 EX/19

PARIS, 5 April 2007
Original: French

Item 19 of the provisional agenda

REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL ON THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN THE PROGRAMME ON INTERFAITH AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND ACTIVITIES DESIGNED TO PROMOTE RESPECT FOR AND DIALOGUE AMONG CULTURES

SUMMARY

This report is submitted pursuant to 33 C/Resolution 49, which invited the Director-General to continue the examination of the place of religion in the programme on interfaith and interreligious dialogue, and to strengthen activities designed to promote respect for and dialogue among all cultures.

Decision proposed: paragraph 19.

Introduction

1. Religion has been recognized as an important issue in the international context, notably in the wake of several conflicts with an inter- or intra-religious dimension. Religion is now on the agenda of the international community, which has realized that misunderstanding and ignorance of religion only heighten tensions and revive communitarianism. The lack of instruction in schools on the historical and sociological aspects of religion or the predominance of religious instruction in only one faith may also lead to lack of understanding among individuals and groups belonging to different faiths or having non-religious convictions. Such lack of understanding may also lead to lack of sensitivity with regard to religious expressions and events and religious symbols and signs, which may then be misused (see also item 23, which will be examined in document 176 EX/23).

2. Likewise, religious dialogue is indissociable from a critical debate on the rights of all stakeholders to freedom of conviction and conscience. In that regard, the concept of secularism, which takes various forms, can only be understood as a response to the desire to ensure religious pluralism and respect for all convictions, whether held by religious believers or non-believers. UNESCO has always emphasized knowledge of religion as a means of understanding social and human realities, without taking a dogmatic approach, which does not fall within its fields of competence. The Organization has therefore endeavoured to encourage religious authorities of all faiths to work in concert, as other civil society partners do, to achieve common goals such as sustainable development, peace and fundamental rights and freedoms.

3. UNESCO is convinced that, as with ignorance generally, ignorance of religion leads to misunderstanding and thus to intolerance of what is not understood. Similarly, a unidimensional culture and education, upholding only one religious “truth” to the detriment of the pluralism of ideas and beliefs, can lead to all kinds of isolationism and nationalistic or ideological excess. In such cases, religion may be used for political ends to break social cohesion, or it may even hide the deep-seated causes of political, economic or social unease. UNESCO must therefore, as a matter of urgency, pursue its programme on interreligious dialogue, a key component of intercultural dialogue, in an interdisciplinary context and in coordination with other United Nations agencies.

Background

4. UNESCO’s programme on interfaith dialogue¹ – a flagship activity of the 2006-2007 biennium (33 C/5 Approved, para. 04220) – is in keeping with UNESCO’s “Roads of Dialogue” programme (Silk Roads, Iron Roads, Slave Route), which includes the “Roads of Faith” project launched in 1991 (26 C/Resolution 3.7), was designed to show how the three religions of the book have contributed to the generation and propagation of spiritual, cultural and artistic wealth.

5. UNESCO’s aim has been, through declarations adopted at meetings convened for that purpose, to bring representatives of the various religions and spiritual traditions together in recognition of the proximity of their spiritual values and their commitment to dialogue with each other. The Organization has always sought to bring together not only eminent religious persons from the monotheistic religions and other religious and spiritual traditions, but also lay intellectuals (historians, historians of religion, anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers and others), recognized for their study of and research on religion, and representatives of humanist schools of thought, including atheists and agnostics.

6. In that context, several international and regional meetings have been held, attended by representatives of the monotheistic religions and other spiritual traditions. Accordingly, the meeting held in Malta in June 1997, attended by representatives of other traditions, highlighted interactions between Eastern and Western religious traditions and reviewed the experiences and perspectives of interreligious dialogue worldwide.

¹ For more information on interreligious dialogue:
http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=11680&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

7. The conduct of interfaith dialogue at the regional level has been of the essence, for it is within a shared geographical and historical area that memory of a conflictual or convivial experience is constructed. In that connection, as part of a series of meetings held at the initiative of the Organization or in which it participated, a summit of Heads of State of South-East Europe was held in Tirana (Albania) in December 2004 on “The Development of Interreligious and Inter-ethnic Dialogue”. Likewise, the Central Asia region, a crossroads of civilizations and spiritual traditions, hosted a forum on “Religion and Culture in Central Asia” in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) in September 1999 and the International Conference on Interreligious Dialogue and for a Culture of Peace in Tashkent (Uzbekistan) in September 2000, followed by a workshop in Bukhara (Uzbekistan) on “Sufism and interreligious dialogue”, in recognition of the central place of this Islamic mystic tradition in spiritual and cultural life, even beyond the borders of Muslim countries. A regional approach was again taken in holding the conference in Almaty (Kazakhstan) in September 2000 on the theme “Science and Spirituality along the Silk Roads”.

8. UNESCO also organized, in conjunction with the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the Ulema Conference on the theme “Islam and Cultural Heritage”, held in Doha (Qatar) in December 2001. The meeting’s participants – world-renowned specialists in Muslim law and religion – called for respect for the heritage of all cultures, in particular for all of the richest and most valuable forms of art created in the history of humanity by the most diverse philosophical and religious movements.

9. In Africa, the International Congress on Dialogue of Civilization, Religion and Cultures in West Africa, held in Abuja (Nigeria) in December 2003, addressed such important issues as conflict mediation in the region, good governance, the role of spiritual traditions, and AIDS. Africa also hosted, in November 2003, in Libreville (Gabon), the International Conference on Intercultural Dialogue and the Culture of Peace in Central Africa and the Great Lakes region, at which one of the main themes was the role of traditional and spiritual leaders in conflict prevention and resolution mechanism in the region’s societies.

10. Similarly, the purpose of the meeting on “Teaching for Tolerance, Respect and Recognition in relation with Religion or Belief”, held in Oslo (Norway) in September 2004, was to encourage formal education process by promoting knowledge of and respect for the freedom of religion or conviction as human rights and to combat discrimination and intolerance based on religion or conviction. Lastly, the South-East Asia and the Pacific region was taken into account at the congress on the theme “Religion in Peace and Conflict: Responding to Militancy and Fundamentalism”, held in Melbourne (Australia) in 2005.

11. During the current biennium (2006-2007), the focus of activities has been on field projects that could have an impact on a wide audience in the hope of obtaining practical results conducive to social cohesion among groups from different backgrounds, cultures and faiths. Special emphasis has been placed on specific groups, such as women, immigrants and young people in sensitive regions, by means of a series of training courses for trainers in the area of intercommunity mediation and reconciliation, organized in cooperation with various partners. The eighth World Assembly of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, held in Kyoto (Japan) in August 2006, and the International Congress on Religions and Mediation in Urban Areas, held in Barcelona in December 2006, in cooperation with UNESCO, addressed the issues of social cohesion and human security.

12. In addition, pursuant to the recommendations and declarations adopted at meetings convened or supported by UNESCO, the decision was taken to establish a network of UNESCO Chairs of Interreligious Dialogue for Intercultural Understanding. The Chairs have been established in university centres which have recognized experience in the field and which bring together academics and researchers specializing in the history of religion and actively engaged in interreligious dialogue. On 31 March 2006, the 15 Chairs signed an agreement uniting them into a network under the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme.

13. The Chairs network has launched a joint programme that takes the form of regional seminars and biannual conferences on various themes relating to interreligious dialogue, which is vital as a means of taking up the basic challenges facing each society and addressing the complexity of international relations. This stands out clearly in the debate on terrorism, the rise of fundamentalism and cultural isolationism and in ethical debates on science, the media and human rights.

14. An in-depth grasp of religion, in particular as a factor of social cohesion and peace, cannot be achieved without the contribution of the media. The need was therefore felt to set up a teaching programme to introduce the media to the subject of religion, and such a programme was launched recently at the University of Geneva, in cooperation with the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris and with the support of the Swiss National Commission for UNESCO. It is now necessary, more than ever before, to guard against generalizations and simplistic views about religion in order to eliminate stereotypes and ignorant assumptions, old and new.

Initial conclusions

15. While international and regional conferences have proven worthwhile and even essential to understanding religion in many geostrategic contexts, the joint reflection entailed is of itself insufficient. The declarations, proposals and final documents adopted at meetings convened by UNESCO have highlighted the need to promote the educational and pedagogical aspects of interreligious dialogue and have laid the foundations for the conceptual and operational framework that is currently in preparation.

16. Priority has therefore been given in recent years to teaching young people about religion and interreligious dialogue in order to make them aware of the value of respect for the Other, which is more vital than ever to ensure harmonious coexistence in contemporary pluralistic societies. Such education rests on two features: on the one hand, mutual knowledge through a comparative and multidisciplinary introduction to the fundamental concepts of religions and spiritual traditions and, on the other hand, examples of their past and present-day interactions and mutual influences, both of which will obviously vary according to each country's education system. On a more general note, databases on good practices concerning innovative means of designing and conducting intercultural dialogue are currently under study and will be available by the end of the biennium. It should be noted that the report of the High-Level Group for the Alliance of Civilizations places special emphasis on the role of education, both formal and non-formal, as a channel for cross-civilizational understanding and highlights the role that UNESCO can play in that regard.

17. As a component of intercultural dialogue, interreligious dialogue draws on various disciplines and thus on the support and cooperation of all UNESCO's sectors, and on the substantial contribution of specialized non-governmental organizations and universities conducting specific research.

18. Understanding of religion and the interreligious dialogue must remain open to all currents of humanist thought since, ultimately, the aim is to seek common ethical values that can be identified, shared and transmitted. Such an exercise must be conducted in the framework of respect for differences, which should be seen not as a divisive factor leading to the disintegration of the social fabric but as a factor of mutual enrichment, beneficial to society as a whole.

Proposed draft decision

19. In view of the foregoing, the Executive Board may wish to adopt a draft decision along the following lines:

The Executive Board,

1. Recalling 33 C/Resolution 49,

2. Having examined document 176 EX/19,
3. Recognizing the importance of the dialogue among peoples and cultures, guarantor of social cohesion and peace,
4. Bearing in mind the recommendations contained in the declarations adopted at conferences on intercultural and interreligious dialogue convened by UNESCO in order to establish better reciprocal knowledge and mutual respect,
5. Reaffirming the need to develop teaching tools and specific educational programmes with a view to fostering cultural and spiritual awareness,
6. Encourages the development of partnerships for the implementation of the recommendations adopted at meetings organized in cooperation with UNESCO and those of the High-Level Group for the Alliance of Civilizations;
7. Invites the Director-General to continue reflection on the place of religion, under an interdisciplinary approach that fosters knowledge of and respect for all cultures.