



2008 Faith in Human Rights Statement

Preamble

On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 2008, we, representatives of various world religions,

are gathered at the Peace Palace, seat of the International Court of Justice, in The Hague, The Netherlands, to pronounce and confirm that our religions recognise and support the human rights and fundamental freedoms of every human person, alone or in community with others.

It must be acknowledged that sadly enough religion sometimes is being misused in a way which violates human rights. But now, while representing different faith traditions, we come together in unity to stress that religion has been a primary source of inspiration for human rights as our sacred writings and teachings clearly show:

“Someone who saves a person’s life is equal to someone who saves the life of all.” (Qu’ran 5:32);

“A single person was created in the world, to teach that if anyone causes a single person to perish, he has destroyed the entire world; and if anyone saves a single soul, he has saved the entire world”

(Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5);

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself” (Luke 10:27);

“Let us stand together, make statements collectively and may our thoughts be one” (Rigveda 10:191:2);

“Just as I protect myself from unpleasant things however small, in the same way I should act towards others with a compassionate and caring mind” (Shantideva, A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life);

“Let us put our minds together to see what life we can make for our children” (Chief Sitting Bull, Lakota).

We recognise our responsibility towards our believers and to the world at large and reaffirm our intention to take all necessary steps both within our communities and in co-operation with others to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms for each and every person, irrespective of religion or belief.

Therefore, we solemnly state to take to our heart the following achievements, challenges and commitments:

I Human Rights: Achievements

1. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights celebrates the dignity of the human person, irrespective of religion, race, sex or other distinctions. As such it helps realise our shared vision of a religiously and culturally diverse world community striving together to promote and defend the rights and dignity of all. The Declaration has stimulated and inspired a new standard setting and good practice at national and international levels. We wish to emphasize the importance of two of its principles: that every person enjoys the freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and that no one should be discriminated against on the basis of religion or belief.

2. States bear the primary responsibility to promote and protect human rights. However, we wish to underline that everyone has duties to the wider communities of which they form a part and only in which the free and full development of one's personality is possible. It is therefore important to make all people aware, through information and education, of their human rights and also of the common responsibility to make human rights a reality. In this regard we commend the valuable contribution of many religious and civil society organisations.

II Human Rights: Challenges

3. We express our deep concern that despite all achievements, the enjoyment of human rights in today's world remains a distant reality for many. Human rights violations cause innocent people to die or to be seriously harmed resulting in untold suffering, loss and hardship. More than ever, in this world threatened by racial, economic and religious divisions, we need to defend and proclaim the universal principles of dignity, equality, freedom, justice, and peace, which are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Challenges to the acceptance of human rights and fundamental freedoms

4. The rights, freedoms and obligations laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are recognised all over the world. Nevertheless, they are not fully accepted everywhere. We observe tensions with regard to a number of specific rights, such as the freedom of religion or belief, the principle of equality and the prohibition of torture. We wish to state clearly that the Declaration should not be regarded as a 'pick-and-choose' list. There is an urgent need for a thorough reflection on the integral acceptance of each right.

Challenges to the interpretation of human rights and fundamental freedoms

5. Human rights are open to a variety of interpretations. The argument of cultural relativity of human rights is at times used to justify grave violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms. We therefore recall the 1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action on Human Rights, wherein all States of the world agreed that "all human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated. (..) While the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical,

cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms.” This implies that a continued dialogue is necessary among government representatives, religious communities, indigenous peoples and independent experts based on a dynamic interpretation of human rights.

Challenges to the implementation of human rights and fundamental freedoms

6. Peace and security are essential conditions for the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Whilst States are entrusted to guarantee the peace and security of their societies and their citizens, this should not lead to curtailing basic human rights. We denounce the development of security measures and means that endanger human life rather than protect it, for example the tremendous worldwide expenditures on weapons. This life-threatening devastating power makes it imperative to look for peaceful means of resolving tensions.

7. The prevalence of violence within the international and national communities remains a source of serious concern and impedes the realisation of human rights. We call on all concerned to pursue all peaceful means of redress and to refrain from a misuse of violence. In addition, we wish to highlight the problem of structural violence within society and of domestic violence in particular. It is of utmost importance to counter this and to save by so doing the lives of the most vulnerable among us.

8. We note with serious concern the increase of intolerance in matters relating to religion or belief, of cases of incitement to religious hatred, overt or covert. While emphasising the importance of the freedom of expression, we deplore portrayals of objects of religious veneration which fail to be properly respectful of the sensibilities of believers. We consider the freedom to have, to retain and to adopt a religion or belief of one’s personal choice, without coercion or inducement, to be an undeniable right. Furthermore, the freedom to manifest one’s religion or belief in any form of worship, observance, practice and teaching may only be subject to carefully defined limitations consistent with generally accepted principles of international law.

9. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights demands meeting basic human needs. The abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty to which more than a billion people are currently subjected, must be decisively altered. The human destruction of the environment has to be stopped. The process of achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (eight targets that 189 countries have pledged to meet by 2015) represents a key indicator of the commitment of States to realise human rights for all.

III Commitments

10. Adherents of various faith traditions have striven to protect human dignity. Religion has to stand for peace, reconciliation, universal values, mutual respect and upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms. Our faith traditions have been and are capable of providing inspiration and guidance towards

realising these aims. We wish to reiterate our commitment to respect all human rights for all, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

11. The contributions that may come from religious inspiration and from the structures of religion or belief towards a fuller implementation of human rights include the need to:

study carefully our holy scriptures and teachings and to explore the theological rationale in defence of human rights; provide responses where harm has been done in the name of religion and seek ways of forgiveness and reconciliation in order to foster mutual respect and understanding among our communities;

address major threats to the full realisation of human rights by fostering concepts of peace, security and development that advance the full realisation of the Millennium Development Goals and make our shared world a safe place to live; listen to the suffering of individuals, families and communities and assist them to tell and visualize their stories so that empathy may lead to solidarity and action; encourage religious communities to become further engaged with human rights issues, both within and outside their community, and stimulate interfaith co-operation with mutual respect.

Conclusion

12. Humbled by the authority that is vested in the religions of the world and conscious of our shared responsibility to defend human rights, we fervently desire that this Statement will initiate a wider process, and will become a catalyst for transformation and change. In order to widen and deepen the support for human rights by religious communities we invite religious leaders around the world to endorse this Statement. We call upon believers everywhere to disseminate this Statement as widely as possible and act upon it.