

International Conference
“Dialogue of Cultures and Inter-Faith Cooperation”
(Volga Forum)

Nizhniy Novgorod, Russia
7-9 September 2006

“The religious dimension of inter-cultural dialogue”

By Thomas Hammarberg
The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Freedom of religion is one of the most sacred human rights. Everyone should be free to have and practice a religion. When this freedom is not respected there will be tensions in society; those discriminated will naturally tend to react.

Respect for the religion of *others* is not only a question of constitutional law or how government institutions behave. It is also a matter of how such respect can be promoted and secured between individuals in a society. Xenophobia is a problem in Russia as well as in many other countries within the Council of Europe.

Every religion is both a faith and at the same time a community which may offer a sense of belonging. On the fringes of all religions, there have been attempts by extremists to misinterpret the message and to manipulate the community to actions which in reality are contrary to the faith itself. In the name of God, false messages of intolerance or even hatred have been spread. The most important counter-moves against such tendencies come from the religious communities themselves, and their leaders.

The human rights movement has many active members from religious communities. These representatives have significantly contributed to raising the profile of religious communities in safeguarding human rights all over the world. My predecessor, Alvaro Gil-Robles, initiated a series of meetings in order to listen to the advice from religious leaders on the most important human rights matters – and what could be done to address them.

Our latest meeting was in Kazan, Russia, where I also had the opportunity to take part. There the importance of dialogue, of continued dialogue, was stressed. Dialogue between religious communities themselves as well as between religions and European and international human rights organizations, like the Council of Europe.

One point was emphasized in particular: the need to secure that our children have the opportunity to learn about ethical values and about religion in school, including about the religion of others. Such education will lead to a more peaceful world.

This is a dialogue which must continue. It is important that political decision-makers at all levels listen to religious representatives; that religious communities interact with and listen to one another; and that there is a continuous discussion inside religious communities. All of this would strengthen the safeguards against extremist and false messages.

All major religions carry the potential to make a profound contribution to this dialogue. There is an ethical depth in their messages and they have established structures to reach out to the community – both these aspects are absolutely crucial.

Each of the major religions, whether Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam or Judaism, harbours a body of ethical values, a moral code which for centuries has organized the life of our societies, and has accompanied them through their evolution. This moral code is, in large part, reflected in human rights principles.

The different monotheistic religious faiths which have developed in the European context, carry a great heritage of profound experience when it comes to ethical values. They could bring with them a deep knowledge of different human situations, conditions and values. They could give genuine substance to what ‘supporting the weakest’ and ‘respecting your neighbour’ actually mean.

The positive force of all our religions - upholding the dignity of every human being - is a source which should be harnessed for the common good. Even when all social structures break down, there will most likely be a religious presence in some form or another in the local community which can accompany the suffering and offer conciliation and hope. Mutual respect is based on the recognition of the fundamental dignity of all human beings. An understanding of and a care for the *other* is essential in this respect. This is what solidarity means.

The contribution by different religions to the European and worldwide reflection on ethics is of crucial importance. This is especially true at a time when the world is increasingly interconnected, yet increasingly divided, and when the view on human dignity is sometimes relativised.

Respect, tolerance and human dignity are shared values connecting human rights and religion.

A couple a weeks ago, in Kyoto in Japan, the World Conference of Religions for Peace took place, with more than 800 senior religious leaders from all regions of the world and all major faith traditions. The World Summit of Religious Leaders in Moscow earlier this summer was an important gathering to promote mutual understanding, as was of course the meeting I mentioned earlier in Kazan last February. We need more such opportunities.

Each religion could also itself contribute to the building of bridges. They all permeate our societies and could unite our civilizations. They have contributed to a dialogue between

people which goes beyond national and cultural borders. In that way, they have played an essential role in the task of bridging divisions, promoting harmonious coexistence, reciprocal friendship and respect between people. And this work is still at an early stage. A lot of things are still waiting to be realized.

Religious communities are locally based and from this position they are able to shape the everyday life of the European citizen, to defend and promote peoples' rights as human beings, everyday, in every situation. Religious communities in their spiritual role, through their moral voice and social engagement are thus very well placed to actively participate in the promotion of democratic values, cultural dialogue and the respect for fundamental freedoms.

This gives a particular responsibility to religious leaders. Hopefully, they could be in the forefront of the fight against extremism, fanaticism and exclusion. On the basis of erroneous or outdated interpretations of sacred texts, and contrary to the fundamental principles of human rights, the enemies of freedom and tolerance want to lead our societies towards fratricidal conflict.

Today these threats to our common society are often practiced in the name of religion. Unfortunately, that risks to create suspicion, doubt and even fear of religion as such. Religious leaders have the prerequisite for and must take an active part in the fight against such false behaviour, by rejecting and condemning it in a non-equivocal manner.

With their locally based organizations and their profound contact with people, religious leaders have an opportunity and a responsibility to promote human dignity and human rights. They should also teach about our mutual dependence on one another, irrespective of national, cultural or religious belonging.

There is a need for all of us to work together. Even if we have different missions and different responsibilities, our goal is similar: to restore the ethical values and to uphold the respect for human rights. On this, we need to join forces and act together.

Here the human rights message is absolutely relevant. Let me quote Andrei Sakharov from his *Memoirs*, which he wrote in this very city during his forced exile: "I'm convinced that only an ideology of human rights can unite people without regard to nationality, political convictions, religion or social status."

We need to support a model of democratic culture by promoting political, intercultural and inter-religious dialogue. A true dialogue can only occur when there is a genuine respect for, and an understanding of other cultures, societies and religions. The freedom of expression is a prerequisite for a true dialogue, as is respect for others beliefs and values. Without such dialogue, we can never reach a more profound understanding, and are exposed to our own limited conclusions.

I believe it would be of great importance for the Council of Europe to find further ways of strengthening cooperation with religious organizations, and to design concrete ways to

address our common challenge of fighting for human rights on the wider European continent.

I trust that this conference will give us the opportunity to discuss all these issues, and I hope that the afternoon sessions will allow many questions and observations to reach the fore. I do hope that we will achieve conclusions which allow us all to leave more enlightened, and to set concrete plans for concrete plans of action and modes of cooperation for the future.

Thank you.