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**RELIGION AND EDUCATION :
THE PROMOTION OF TOLERANCE THROUGH THE
EDUCATION OF RELIGIOUS FACTS »**

Seminar organised by

The Commissioner for Human Rights
Mr. Alvaro GIL-ROBLES

and

The Foundation for International Studies
of the University of Malta

La Valette, Malta, 17 and 18 May 2004

C o n c l u s i o n s

Following on from the dialogue with representatives of the Europe's leading monotheistic faiths initiated in Syracuse in 2000, and continued in Strasbourg and Louvain-La-Neuve the following years, on the role of religions in overcoming the principal social challenges facing the member States of the Council of Europe, the Commissioner for Human Rights decided this year to further the reflection begun in Louvain-La-Neuve on the fundamental role of education in the shaping of the citizens of the future.

The Commissioner and the participants from the leading monotheistic faiths, national administrations of the member States of the Council of Europe and the academic world, express their gratitude to the Foundation for International Studies of the University of Malta for its warm welcome and for enabling the conference to proceed in a free and constructive atmosphere.

The discussions focused primarily on the relations between education and religions and the contribution made by both to the promotion of tolerance through awareness in our post-modern societies.

It was widely held that our societies are currently being undermined by a lack of cultural awareness particularly prevalent amongst, and unequally affecting, the younger generations of Europe, with immediate and unwelcome social consequences. In effect, religious institutions have ceased to transmit their religious cultures to new generations, with the increased secularisation having resulted in the collapse of the traditional passing on of this knowledge. The transmission of the sacred and the cultural has, however, long been linked. We have witnessed, as a result, a decline in our general culture awareness.

It was considered essential to revitalise the understanding of our cultural heritages, in which religions play an integral part. Only one institution is capable of fulfilling this task – our schools, whether public or private.

It was recognised that schools must be the primary mechanism for the transmission of cultural traditions. At the same time, schools do not have a monopoly on such transmission. Even if the State confers this task on schools, they will need to be armed with the necessary means and methods to be successful.

In this context, it was recalled that it is impossible to combine the individual histories of each in a single unified approach. It was emphasised by many participants that national and traditional components remain central to the reappropriation of our religious heritages.

The question consequently arises of the content and methods of such teaching. If religious teaching ought to remain within the exclusive domain of the religions themselves, it is incumbent on schools, whether public or private, to include other aspects of religious cultures in its teaching, such as their history, ethics, philosophy, artistic manifestations, literature and forms of social organisation. Such subjects will contribute to an understanding of religious beliefs as they are subjectively experienced by their congregations.

A third element was also emphasised – the need to clearly show the universal values and wisdom inherent in each religion. The fulfilment of this task should provide a common ground for dialogue between different religions, respecting, and in harmony with, human rights.

In the discussions flowing from these common views, the participants agreed on the importance of pursuing the idea first raised in Louvain-la-Neuve of creating a common home for the promotion of such dialogue and the exchange of experiences in the area of education, in which a methodology for the inclusion of the religious dimension in the general education provided by schools might be elaborated.

To this end, it was suggested that a working group be established to examine how an international Institute for co-operation in the field the education of religions in schools might best be established and what its mandate might be. The Commissioner for Human Rights was encouraged to promote this initiative and accepted this task. The central role of the Council of Europe in this area of great importance to the respect for human rights in Europe was emphasised.