



INTERACTION COUNCIL

High-Level Expert Group Meeting

**Chairman's Report on
the High-level Expert Group Meeting**

“World Religions as a Factor in World Politics”

**Chaired by
Ingvar Carlsson, Co-Chairman**

**7-8 May 2007
Tübingen, Germany**

The InterAction Council has been engaged in dialogue between political leaders and religious leaders since 1987, when issues concerning peace, development and the environment were discussed. In the last decade, thinkers from all faiths and philosophies have focussed on identifying universal ethical standards, which resulted in a proposal for a “Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities.”

Since the turn of the millennia, the issues facing the world have become much more complex: religious misunderstanding has led to conflict, global warming threatens dire environmental consequences, and rising terrorism has instilled fear throughout the world. Can religions become a force for peace, justice and ethical values? Can the virtue of tolerance be taught – tolerance out of respect and not out of neglect? Can societies meet the challenge of respecting the cultural and religious identity of other people and nations? Can the world recognise a new global neighbourhood? Can leaders anchor hope to establish concrete positive ideas?

The world may be entering the second axial age with a modern upsurge of religion. In this 2007 High-level Expert Group meeting held 7-8 May in Tübingen, Germany, at the site of the world-renowned Global Ethics Foundation, the InterAction Council asked religious scholars to collectively consider methods of finding meaning in existence and peace in politics.

I. Common Ground

There isn't one Judaism, one Christianity or one Islam; there isn't one Buddhism or Hinduism. As well, myriad beliefs comprise the Chinese religions. Each major religion has diversity of faith, theology and belief within.

While the importance of recognising diversity *within* religions is widely accepted, it is equally important to appreciate the commonalities *among* religions. The three monotheistic religions heretofore have been seen as being in opposition to one another, but now more than ever, we must see these religions *in relationship* to one another. Through inter-faith education, these goals can be achieved. In particular, inter-faith discussions should be approached with an expectation to *learn* rather than to teach.

Genuine dialogue is an art that requires careful nurturing, and the benefits of dialogical relationships at personal, local, national or international levels cannot be underestimated. Dialogue is neither a tactic of persuasion nor a strategy of conversion, but a way of generating mutual understanding through shared common values. Increased knowledge about others' religions and cultures must be encouraged, and broad, sweeping generalisations discouraged.

Through dialogue, one can appreciate the value of learning from the other in the spirit of mutual reference. On a broader level, the goal is to become 'learning societies' rather than to remain 'teaching societies,' and to teach our children the commonalities amongst the world's religions instead of only the differences.

Thus, the Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities has gained even greater importance. Recognising a common global ethic, politicians, religious scholars, atheists and agnostics have reached mutual understanding. Religious freedom includes the right not to be physically or morally compelled to accept a particular religion or a particular ideology. This universal ethical standard provides a tool for understanding and respecting the beliefs and consciences of others. We, therefore, reaffirm the Universal Declaration accepted by religious leaders of every major faith as creating a common set of ethical values which exist in all religions.

II. The Relationship between Politics and Religion

In considering the commonalities shared among religions, the High-level Expert Group also discussed the substantial influence of religions in politics. This political and religious tension has been amplified by the existence of global movements in opposite directions: increased secularism in some parts of the world and increased religiosity in others. By almost every indicator, regular church attendance in the European West has decreased to a mere 20%. By contrast, in the United States, religiosity is on the rise, and today approximately 65% of Americans attend church weekly. The Arab world and parts of Asia have also seen a similar rise in religiosity.

While religious movements can wield great positive influence in national politics, too often religion is exploited and abused by political leaders who take advantage of ignorance and sow seeds of insecurity to maintain power. The combination of ignorance, religion and nationalism creates a dangerous potential for war. This powerful dynamic between religion and politics has spurred international conflicts and supported oppressive regimes worldwide, including the disastrous occupation of and degenerating war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the entrenched conflict in Israel/Palestine, the long civil war in Sri Lanka, and new violence in Thailand.

In reality, political decisions often contrast sharply with the religious doctrines they purport to invoke. Fundamentalism is not an essential attribute to any religion, but characteristic to many. Our task is to challenge religious leaders to prevent their religions from being misused, isolate the 'religious extremism' that is prone to political exploitation, and support and strengthen moderate religious movements.

III. Moving Forward

Despite these complex issues, still many in the High-level Expert Group saw 'glimmers of hope' in the path moving forward. The anthropological foundations of human dignity, human rights and human responsibilities present the world with a shared ethic with universal validity.

In the age of a new global neighbourhood, we need responsible global citizens. In the future religious leaders will play an even more important role. They must master two languages: the language of their respective faith communities and the language of global citizenship. This provides an opportunity to embrace a global ethic of political, economic, and social equality amongst races, culture and gender.

One of the greatest issues that we face is protecting the environment for future generations. Every species is precious to the life of the Earth, but more than a hundred species become extinct every day. Again, religious leaders have a significant role to play in harnessing the power of people to face these global challenges, by lending moral weight to nurture ecological sensitivity toward efforts to sustain the planet. We must be stewards of the Earth rather than its exploiters.

In the last 25 years, the dialogue amongst religious faiths has changed. There has been a greater recognition that religious differences should not impede humanity, but instead that religion should inspire people find the ideal in humanity. But it has only just begun.

IV. Recommendations

In moving forward, the Chairman of the High-level Expert Group Meeting recommends the following:

- Reaffirming and strengthening the persuasive power of the Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities; putting “human responsibilities” in the context of the spirit of our time; and underscoring the core values — justice, compassion, civility and harmony mentioned prominently in the Declaration — to facilitate a genuine dialogue with human rights advocates;
- Promoting the understanding that all religions have a common core of ethical norms —harmony without uniformity — and enhancing the consciousness of global citizenship and common humanity through a global ethical standard;
- Supporting the idea and practice of global citizenship to encourage a fruitful interaction between aspirations for self-realisation and obligations in a global neighbourhood;
- Developing an action plan through inter-faith education for increasing tolerance, respect, mutual reference and learning to appreciate the plurality of religious beliefs, values and practices;
- Supporting religious freedom; strengthening open and peaceful self-reflexive religious movements; and encouraging leaders in all sectors of society together with religious leaders to reject and prevent the politicisation and misuse of religion;

- Recognising the threat to the viability of human species and harnessing the power of religious movements to meet the environmental challenges of respecting life and protecting the Earth for the benefit of future generations; and
- Identifying ways to promote peace and solidarity while preserving cultural diversity and the plurality of faith communities.

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List of Participants

IAC Members

1. H. E. Mr. Helmut **Schmidt**, Honorary Chairman (Former Chancellor of Germany)
2. H. E. Mr. Malcolm **Fraser**, Honorary Chairman (Former Prime Minister of Australia)
3. H. E. Mr. Ingvar **Carlsson**, Co-chairman (Former Prime Minister of Sweden)
4. H. E. Mr. AbdelSalam **Majali** (Former Prime Minister of Jordan)
5. H. E. Mr. Franz **Vranitzky** (Former Chancellor of Austria)

High-level Experts

6. Dr. A. Kamal **Aboulmagd** (Islam, Sunni), Attorney at Law (Egypt)
7. Dr. Kezevino **Aram** (Hindu), Director, Shanti Ashram (India)
8. Rev. Dr. Mettanando **Bhikkhu** (Theravada Buddhist), Special Advisor on the Buddhist Affairs to the World Conference of Religions for Peace (Thailand)
9. Prof. Hans **Küng** (Christian), Professor Emeritus, Tübingen University (Switzerland)
10. Prof. Karl-Josef **Kuschel** (Christian), Vice President of the Global Ethic Foundation (Germany)
11. Rabbi Jonathan **Magonet** (Judaism), Leo Baeck College (U. K.)
12. Archbishop **Makarios** of Kenya (Greek Orthodox) (Cyprus)
13. Dr. Stephan **Schlenso**, Hindu Expert, Secretary-General, Global Ethic Foundation (Germany)
14. Dr. Abdolkarim **Soroush** (Islam, Shia) (Iran)
15. Dr. **Tu** Weiming (Chinese religions and philosophies), Harvard University (China)
16. Dr. Osamu **Yoshida** (Mahayana Buddhist), Professor, Toyo University (Japan)

Advisors

17. Dr. Thomas **Axworthy**, Professor, Queen's University (Canada)
18. Dr. Gunther **Gebhardt**, Global Ethic Foundation (Germany)
19. Prof. Nagao **Hyodo**, Former Ambassador to Belgium (Japan)

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20. Prof. Isamu **Miyazaki**, Former Minister of Economic Planning (Japan)

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