



The Minister of International Development and Human Rights Hilde Frafjord Johnson

Closing Remarks / Call to Action

Holmenkollen Park Hotel, Oslo, 15 August 1998

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The time has now come to close the Oslo Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief. On behalf of the Norwegian Government it is a great pleasure for me to speak to you once more and to sum up the deliberations of this important conference on strengthening and broadening the universal efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief. I will try to be brief in doing so.

By making this conference happen we have accepted the challenge of building a coalition to promote universal freedom of religion or belief. This is a challenge worthy of our deepest commitment, requiring imagination, vision and courage. We have a major challenge before us; the values at stake are human life, human dignity and freedom from oppression. For those of us who have read the World Report on Religious Freedom, the odds may seem impossible. But human history shows that the odds are never impossible when the dreamers dare to dream and the doers dare to do what is right.

At this conference we have heard papers and ideas from most corners of the world. Now the time has come to clear our minds, to reflect and to decide on the road ahead. First, I would like to say a few words to link up with my introductory remarks on Wednesday. I agree with the organizers of this conference that tolerance and respect for freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief are not growing as rapidly as the globalization of science, technology and the economy.

Moreover, it is clear to me that this has already created confrontations and conflicts. The destructive potential of this gap is obvious. To this we must add the often painful experience of the past. Poverty - which dramatically affects the life and dignity of at least one billion people - in itself contributes to the problems we have been discussing here at this conference. Religious intolerance and oppression are often fuelled by inequality and material need. Often the result is violence, conflict and war, which in turn undermine development. This is a vicious circle. It must be broken.

Fundamentalism is sometimes part of this vicious circle. In its fanatic forms fundamentalism is - as also stated by Bishop Gunnar Stålsett - an affront to humanity. Fundamentalism is often incompatible with the basic values of human dignity and freedom, and it often contributes to the violation of fundamental human rights.

If I were to single out one element of this conference that has left a particularly strong impression on me personally, it is the great potential of religion and belief to turn the tide, to bring about peace and reconciliation where we today see such forces, where we see armed conflict and other forms of strife. Religions and beliefs are able to make the doors both wide and high, to make a difference.

I welcome the emergence of an 'Oslo Coalition' to support Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1981 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. A comprehensive, multidisciplinary and international coalition of government and non-government representatives has not been instituted before. It is high time that one was instituted. To this end the Oslo Conference has picked up where the 1984 Geneva Seminar left off. There have been many attempts since 1984, some of them very fruitful, but none of them succeeded in building such a coalition.

I believe we should focus on the following measures:

The key point of departure must be the mandate of the Special Rapporteur. This is the only mechanism with a worldwide scope and thus his role is crucial. Another key point of departure is the role and responsibilities of all the rest of us, and in particular the religious and humanist communities themselves and other actors in civil society. I have drawn up a list of seven points which is, however, by no means exhaustive. Other ideas are welcome. I will read out the list to you, slowly - rather than elaborating on it at length. I feel that the time has now come to focus our minds by presenting a checklist. What is needed is action. Thus, my task is to call to action. I pledge the strong support of my Government for the following measures.

1. The Special Rapporteur should be given the necessary means and resources to actively promote the cause of victims of intolerance based on religion or belief all over the world. The Norwegian Government has this year contributed an additional USD 1,5 mill. to the High Commissioner for Human Rights to this end.
2. This must include:
 - monitoring of trends worldwide and at country level
 - dissemination of information to the public and through public education
 - direct calls on governments
 - mediation in cases of conflict
 - coordination with other UN mechanisms and programmes, especially within the Human Rights Commission
3. Fulfilling this will require, as I just pointed out, a significant increase in resources, qualified staff, and the building of state-of-the-art databases for effective information collection and dissemination.
4. Religious groups and humanist communities must give priority to their own efforts to promote tolerance and combat all forms of oppression based on religion or belief. This is a prerequisite for making significant improvements worldwide. Change for the better will not come from governments alone. The communities themselves - and individuals within them - must change their own attitudes towards brothers and sisters in *other* religious or humanist communities.
5. Apart from the religious and humanist communities themselves, all actors in civil society, and in particular the NGO community, must join in the intensified struggle. Strengthening links and information exchange mechanisms with the UN Special Rapporteur is a critically important step. Building networks at the national and local level is equally important. The NGOs are indispensable in the struggle for change.
6. The idea of a Working Group in a UN context should be considered seriously. Consultations, probably informal ones, should be held on the subject with governments, religious groups and

humanist communities.

7. Dissemination and education should not only be part of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur. It is also a key obligation of governments, NGOs and the religious communities themselves.

You may ask, but what about governments? Governments are clearly the entities that most urgently need to change their behaviour. Yes, this is of course true. The direct responsibility for human rights violations will always lie with governments. It is also an important task for governments to address violations of freedom of religion or belief when they take place in other states.

These seven points are all intended to force change on governments. And the consent of governments of good will is needed to implement most of them. I can assure you that Norway is willing to do its part.

On Christmas Day 1914, the British and German soldiers left their trenches in Flanders and sang Christmas carols for each other in no-man's land. This was a brave and moving gesture, a great example of 'cultural exchange', even in time of war. It was an expression of humanity in the midst of appalling inhumanity. However, that terrible war was to go on for another four years. The gesture changed nothing - except, perhaps, in the hearts of those who made it. And that is the point about culture and about religion or belief. In the darkest hour it can be an expression of ideals, strength of character, hope and our common aspirations. It can be an expression of human dignity. And it can, when the circumstances are right, be the spark that sets off change, and the driving force that makes the difference.

Countries and states have borders, whereas religions and beliefs do not. Religions and beliefs are, therefore, never 'national'; nor should they be. Religions are integrated into wider regional, international or global frameworks. All the world's religions know no clearly defined boundaries. As I pointed out in my opening remarks - and as has now been proved by you - it is only through dialogue and the exchange of views and experience that coalitions and common ground are formed and a deeper understanding and respect are achieved.

As we now go our separate ways, we would do well to bear in mind the words of Mahatma Gandhi, who once said that "*My life is my message*". These are the words with which I would like to conclude this conference. As set out in the Declaration adopted here; "*all religions and non-religious beliefs have the capacity to teach peace and good will, to proclaim a desire to view others as friends and not enemies, [to] denounce prejudice and discrimination*". Let these words guide your steps on your way back home, be it to Jordan, Sri Lanka, South Africa, France or only a few kilometres from here. May your actions prove that your lives are your messages.

Thank you.



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