

WORLD COUNCIL OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL LEADERS

Rationale and Concept

*Inaugural Meeting of Steering Council
October 22-24, 2001*

Background

Over the years, many leaders, both religious and secular, have recognized the need to create an entity that would address critical world issues from the perspective of the faith traditions. By bringing together the leaders from the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Islamic and Indigenous traditions, the human community can begin to draw upon the collective wisdom and universal moral and spiritual principles that are the bedrock of all the great religions.

Over the past few decades, interreligious dialogue and relations have advanced to the point where such an entity is no longer an ideal but a concept whose time has come. It took two world wars to give birth to the United Nations. During the last few decades, it has taken numerous conflicts involving religion to make concrete the need for a World Council of Religious and Spiritual Leaders.

The creation of this World Council was one of the fundamental purposes for organizing the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders at the United Nations in August 2000. The goal has been to create a body of religious leaders that would work in close coordination with the United Nations, to bring the spiritual repository of the human community to the solving of critical world problems. United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan fully recognizes and appreciates the value religious leaders bring to the political equation. Indeed, there is growing acknowledgment that there will not be peace in this world without the leadership and cooperation of the religions, which cross national boundaries and have far greater reach than most political bodies.

The tragedy of September 11 has created a new urgency as the world faces the danger of realignment along religious lines. As diversity grows in communities around the world, so too does intolerance of differences. These threats are also hastening the opposite – the emergence of a reinforced commitment to find the common voice within religion – the central universal values that would form the basis for a new global vision.

The need for a World Council of Religious and Spiritual Leaders is clearer today than it was one year ago. The challenge now is to move from concept to reality.

The Current Crisis

On September 11th, a tragedy of massive proportion changed the world. Religion moved to center stage in a way few could have envisioned. Religious fundamentalism, a small but vocal presence in all faith traditions, seeks to divide the world along religious lines. The dangers posed by these extremes within the religious tradition are now known to be a grave threat to the human community. Only the world's respected religious leadership can truly counter this threat.

What could World Council do to abate the dangers of religious extremism and the consequent terrorist activities? Throughout history, religion has been a force for bringing destruction as well as benefit to humankind. Can World Council steer religious fervor and commitment toward the common good? Can World Council strengthen our shared values and help transform ignorance and the fear of difference into respect and appreciation?

September 11th made clear how fragile still is the ability of the religions to honor each other. It also made clear the degree to which we have become a global community, unable any longer to avoid knowing and respecting each other.

Ironically, the events of September 11th set the stage for religious leaders to come forward in a new way, their audience no longer just their own constituents, but rather the entire global community.

Mission

During a recent conference call, the Archbishop of Canterbury told us that religions now need to redefine their theologies for modernity. If we are to address the most critical problems, the religions need to act in concert, rather than seek to fulfill their own, sometimes opposing, ends.

This redefining of the theologies can help find the common purpose of religion – to relieve suffering, foster harmony, promote the dignity of all life. In the same conference call, the Chief Rabbi of England spoke about creating a world culture that recognizes the dignity of difference and finds unity in diversity.

The mission of the World Council of Religious and Spiritual Leaders is to create dialogue among the most senior leaders of all the major faith traditions. The purpose is not to discuss theology or matters

than pertain to the organization or foundation of any individual faith tradition, but rather to find a means of working together to address critical social issues – poverty, conflict, intolerance, environment degradation, terrorism, etc.

Just as the United Nations requires nation states to dialogue with each other, this Council would necessitate exchange among the religions, where currently there is no formal body for such engagement on world issues.

Structure

Each of the major religious traditions has its own internal dynamic and organizational structure. Most of the religions are nonhierarchical and do not speak with a singular voice. The Catholic Church is the exception. Where there is a hierarchy, this structure would determine representation on the Council. Where there is none, eminent leaders from a religious tradition who have the respect and recognition of their community globally could represent the faith.

The Council will evolve from a group of members who are committed to the concept and to working together to address global problems through the wisdom of the faith traditions.

Purpose of the Steering Council

The inaugural meeting of the Steering Council is taking place October 22-24, 2001 at the Rockefeller Brothers Conference Center in Pocantico Hills, New York. The Steering Council will define the mission and purpose of the Council. Leaders from the religious traditions will explore how the World Council could function from the perspective of their faith tradition, and how their tradition could be represented.

Specific subjects to be discussed:

- Organization and structure of the World Council
- Representation: by religion, region, gender, race
- The mandate: responding to a world crisis
- Relationship to United Nations and other international organizations,
such as the World Bank
- Where and when to meet

- Funding
- Implementation of decisions
- Process for creation of World Council

If critical social problems are to be successfully addressed, an integrated framework of religion, government and business must be created. Just as the United Nations has invited members of civil society to work with government on global issues, the World Council must actively engage with business and government so that all major sectors of society will become part of the process of creating social transformation. Thus initiatives launched by the World Council could be carried out with the help of governments and businesses around the world.

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