

“Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together”
The role of inter-religious dialogue towards the universal enjoyment
of the right of freedom of religion and belief

27 February 2020
Palais des Nations, Room XXI, Geneva

Ibrahim Salama, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

Excellencies, distinguished panellists, ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, I am pleased to participate in this panel debate co-organized by the Permanent Missions of the Holy See and of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations in Geneva, illustrating the value of inter-religious dialogue as a means of fostering freedom of religion and belief.

In times of growing polarization, promoting interfaith dialogue is important to unlock action. Dialogue is one of the most effective means to build trust among different people, and help communities counter violence committed in the name of religion.

For this reason, we in OHCHR sincerely welcome the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, signed by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed Al-Tayyeb during a visit by Pope Francis to the United Arab Emirates last February.

In this landmark document, the Pope and the Imam affirm that each individual enjoys the freedom of belief, thought, expression and action. They also stress the importance of protecting the rights of women, children and the elderly.

In order to achieve the objectives enshrined in the Document, a High Committee composed of Christian, Jewish and Muslim members, chaired by Cardinal Guixot, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, was established last August. I look forward with great interest to hearing about the activities identified by the Committee so far.

A core aspect of the freedom of religion or belief, namely the right to manifest one’s religion or belief, relies on the degree of protection afforded to freedom of expression. One cannot be fully enjoyed without the other or in the absence of the right to privacy, freedom of association and peaceful assembly. This suggests that the two rights are not only interdependent, but also exist in a legal continuum with myriad other rights. Accordingly, it is more appropriate to view the relationship between these rights as being mutually reinforcing, rather than one of tension or hierarchy.

At the international level, the 2012 Rabat Plan of Action emphasizes the role of religious leaders and politicians in refraining from incitement to violence and in speaking out firmly and promptly against hate speech. It provides an essential policy framework by outlining a threshold test for defining restrictions on freedom of expression and incitement to hatred. This six-part test takes into account the context, status of the speaker, intent behind the message, its content, how widely the message is spread and the risk that it will actually lead to violence.

The UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech refers to the Rabat Plan of Action, as does the Beirut Declaration on “Faith for Rights”. Launched in March 2017 under the auspices of OHCHR with the engagement of faith actors and international human rights experts, the “Faith for Rights” framework draws from insights gleaned under the Rabat Plan of Action into the positive role that faith actors can play in responding to incitement to hatred and violence.

The aim of the “Faith for Rights” framework is to mobilize faith-based resources to promote all human rights, in particular by recognizing the interdependence of the freedom of expression and the freedom of religion or belief. The Beirut Declaration and its 18 commitments include the pledge not to oppress critical voices and views on matters of religion or belief, however wrong or offensive they may be perceived, in the name of the “sanctity” of the subject matter.

The value of documents lies in their implementation. A follow-up to the Fraternity document needs to link the dots with relevant new tools. This includes in particular the #Faith4Rights toolkit, which we launched last month with faith actors, academics, UN special rapporteurs and treaty body members. This innovative peer-to-peer learning methodology echoes and directly quotes the Fraternity document in its central points.¹

It is important to note that the #Faith4Rights toolkit is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Faith actors and human rights experts design it in a creatively flexible and empowering manner to be adaptable to different contexts. The modules offer concrete ideas for learning exercises, for instance how to share personal experiences through storytelling and provide for inspiring examples of artistic expressions. It builds on a wealth of comparable tools by several UN agencies that have been integrated into the #Faith4Rights toolkit. The whole concept is interactive, result-oriented and conducive to critical thinking.

Faith actors are human rights defenders in their own discipline. As such, they have responsibilities. They also have a fundamental right to be fully equipped and involved in using UN tools and standards.

In many ways, the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* can be seen as an expression of the “Faith for Rights” initiative and the Rabat Plan of Action underpinning it. It provides a framework, mechanism and inspiration for action to ensure realization of the human right to freedom of religion or belief through dialogue and action. Inter-religious dialogue is a vehicle for positive speech, a healing tool of reconciliation and peacebuilding in the hearts and minds.

But we also need to move towards creating change on the ground, based on concrete projects that give priority to education and capacity-building of faith actors within a shared vision and framework across different religious or belief communities.

If you agree, let this be one of the messages of today’s side event.

Thank you.

¹ See <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Press/faith4rights-toolkit.pdf>, pp. 20, 36 and 38.