

The Oslo Declaration on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Background: In August 1998, The international conference on the freedom of religion was held in Oslo, Norway.

Around 150 representatives from religious and humanist communities, governments and academic institutions worldwide attended the Conference. The conference was hosted by the Norwegian Council of Religious and Humanist Communities, with the aim of focusing on freedom of religion and belief in the light of the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The conference was held in connection with the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights, and the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Mary Robinson and the Norwegian Prime Minister Mr. Kjell Magne Bondevik took part.

The conference was chaired by three presidents: The international representative for Won Buddhists to the U.N., Dr. Chung-Ok Lee from New York, Special Rapporteur on the U.N. Declaration on Freedom of Religion or Belief (1981), professor Abdellefatah Amor from Tunis and the (Lutheran) bishop of Oslo, Norway, Gunnar Staalsett.

The conference adopted the following statement:

The Oslo Declaration for Freedom og Religion or Belief

Whereas the Oslo Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief, meeting in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, reaffirms that every person has the right to freedom of religion or belief;

And whereas participants in the Oslo Conference have accepted the challenge to build an international coalition and to develop a strategic plan of action to achieve substantial progress in and give practical support to the implementation of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the 1981 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief;

Therefore, we the participants in the Oslo Conference:

Recognize that religions and beliefs teach peace and good will;

Recognize that religions and beliefs may be misused to cause intolerance, discrimination and prejudice, and have all too often been used to deny the rights and freedoms of others;

Affirm that every human being has a responsibility to condemn discrimination and intolerance based on religion or belief, and to apply religion or belief in support of human dignity and peace;

Consider the founding of the United Nations and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to be watershed events, in which the world community recognized for the first time that the existence of human rights transcends the laws of sovereign states;

Confirm that Article 18 of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights together with other instruments create both a mandate for freedom of religion or belief and a universal standard around which we wish to rally;

Recognize that the U.N. has made significant accomplishments in strengthening this universal standard by passage of the 1981 U.N. Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, by the appointment of a Special Rapporteur to monitor its implementation, and by further defining freedom of religion or belief in the General Comment on Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;

Recommend that the U.N. Commission on Human Rights change the title of the Rapporteur to Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief;

Urge increased financial and personnel support to the U.N. to implement the work of the Special Rapporteur and his recommendations;

Request the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights to develop a coordinated plan to focus resources of the United Nations, including all specialized agencies and bodies such as UNESCO, ILO, UNDP, and UNHCR on problems involving freedom of religion or belief;

Call for UNESCO to expand work for peace through religious and cultural dialogue and encourage intensified co-operation with UNESCO in this field;

Urge scholars and teachers to study and apply the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1981 Declaration as universal standards on freedom of religion or belief and as a way to solve problems of intolerance and discrimination caused by competing beliefs;

Challenge governments, religious bodies, interfaith associations, humanist communities, non-governmental organizations and academic institutions to create educational programs using the 1981 Declaration as a universal standard to build a culture of tolerance and understanding and respect between people of diverse beliefs;

Further urge U.N. member states to use the 1981 Declaration and other relevant instruments to mediate, negotiate, and resolve intolerance, discrimination, injustice and violence in conflicts where religion or belief plays a role;

Support research and development of other informational resources and methodologies for collecting information, monitoring compliance and initiating comparative country studies to strengthen the work of the United Nations and protect freedom of religion or belief;

Urge the organizers and sponsors of the Oslo Conference, in consultation with Conference participants:

to review the discussions and recommendations of the Conference, with the purpose of creating an "Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief," inviting support and participation by governments, religious or belief communities, academic institutions and non-governmental organizations; and

to develop a strategic plan of action and seek funding to carry out programs and projects based on its recommendations, in cooperation with the United Nations system.