

# THE U.N. Finally, a Statement On Freedom of Religion, Conscience

United Nations (RNS) — The United Nations General Assembly has adopted a declaration on the elimination of religious intolerance which has been under way for 20 years.

Taking into account the diverse ideologies and religions in the world today, the document affirms "freedom of thought, conscience and religion: as a basic human right which should be enjoyed by all individuals, subject to national laws."

The Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief was approved by the U.N. General Assembly Nov. 25. The assembly also agreed to include an item on the elimination of religious intolerance on the agenda of its next session.

The document was endorsed earlier by the U.N.'s Human Rights Commission, Economic and Social Council, and most recently by the Third Committee which handles matters of social, humanitarian and cultural concerns.

Religious freedom is already implied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Human Rights. But the need for a separate document to deal specifically with religion and belief has been sought by a number of countries since the 1960s.

The declaration was originally conceived to counter religious persecution. However, in an attempt to make it more universally acceptable and applicable, drafters of the latest document have focused on the fundamental issue of freedom of conscience, which includes all forms of belief.

Catholic theologian Michael Novak, reporting to the Third Committee as the U.S. representative, said the United States recognizes that "all human rights begin in freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief."

"There is a burning center of liberty and conscience in every human person," he said. "Each has an inner life . . . Each follows the clues of existence upon this planet and respects its moral universe as best as he can decipher it."

Dr. Novak noted that delegates who worked on the document last winter in Geneva added the word "belief" to the word "religion . . . for we all wished to show how extensive our respect for freedom and thought and conscience is. Many, perhaps most in these United Nations, are religious — Buddhist and Muslim, Baha'i, Mormon, Hindu, Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and others. But some human beings, in freedom of thought and conscience and choice, are not religious . . . they, too, are worthy of respect."

The Permanent U.N. Observer Mission of the Holy See issued a brief statement, saying that "the spirit of understanding which allowed this text finally to be completed should lead us to treat the question with moderation and mutual respect."

"The text is proposed as the sign of a spirit of negotiation representing a compromise between different positions and concepts," said Archbishop Giovanni Cheli, who leads the delegation.

"Certainly, everyone can find weaknesses in it and can uncover over-

“(It) should lead us to treat the question with mutual respect.” — Vatican U.N. Mission.

sights. But it seems to us preferable to emphasize the positive result of a genuine desire on the part of the entire international community to affirm that the right to the expression of religious faith is a dimension of life which cannot be refused because it originates from the human conscience itself."

The declaration has been endorsed by the human rights committee of non-governmental organizations which have consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. Among them are nearly 30 international religious organizations including World Muslim Congress, Agudas Israel World Organization, Baha'i International Community, Baptist World Alliance, Caritas Internationalis, Christian Peace Conference, Church World Service, World Council of Churches, Lutheran World Federation, Pax Christi, World Conference on Religion and Peace, Jewish World Congress, World's Women Christian Temperance Union, International Humanist and Ethical Union.

Other religious groups which have endorsed the declaration include American Baptist Churches, American Jewish Committee, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, and National Council of Churches.

While the declaration doesn't create legal rights and obligations, it provides the international community with a statement of fundamental principles on human rights in religion and belief.

The American Jewish Committee described the document as "all the more impressive in view of the diverse ideological and political elements that had to be reconciled in its making."

"Adherents the world over, and non-believers, too, now have a valuable international instrument of public education and advocacy," said Rita Hauser, chairman of the Jewish agency's foreign affairs commission.

The eight-article declaration proclaims the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion "either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching."

However, these rights are subject "to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others."

Article Four says all states shall take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination based on religion or belief "in all fields of civil, economic, political, social and cultural life."

Concerning the rights of parents and children, Article Five says parents or legal guardians have the right to "organize the life within the family in accordance with their religion or belief and bearing in mind the moral education in which they believe the child should be brought up."

At the same time, the child is to be "protected from any form of discrimination on the ground of religion or belief" and be brought up in a "spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship among peoples, peace and universal brotherhood, respect for freedom of religion or belief of others . . . the best interests of the child being the guiding principle."

The declaration proclaims that freedom of religion and belief includes the following freedoms, subject to limitations prescribed by law: freedom to worship or assemble, to establish and maintain appropriate charitable institutions, to produce and use materials related to rites or customs, to write and disseminate relevant publications, to teach a religion or belief in suitable places, to solicit and receive donations, to train and place appropriate leaders, to observe days of rest and celebrate holidays and ceremonies, to maintain communication with individuals and communities at national and international levels.

Fr. John Reedy



Looking for the Lord

## No Need For Intolerant Zealots

Last week I commented on the increasing number of American bishops who are speaking out — individually, but as bishops — on the immorality of national policies such as the development of the neutron bomb, the development of the MX missile, the stockpiling of nuclear weapons.

Some additional comments . . . and I hope these will be read carefully.

I would like to think that if I were in the position of these bishops I would have the courage to speak out as they are doing. But there is still room for distinctions, for careful thought.

A religious leader, a bishop, has a responsibility quite different from those of the president, the secretaries of state and defense, the congressmen and senators.

It seems entirely appropriate that a religious leader should focus on the potential evil of nuclear war, of human beings left unsatisfied because of huge investments in weapons, of the danger of a disastrous accident.

I can see a link between judgments on these actual and potential evils and the blistering denunciations of the Old Testament prophets. In both situations, the religious leaders proclaim: what is happening is contrary to what God wants of and for his people.

But if I could imagine myself as president of the United States, listening attentively to the words of these bishops, I would also have to consider: What would be the probable, the possible consequences if my administration adopted a policy of unilateral rejection of all nuclear arms? Am I sure that other nuclear powers would follow? What might be the consequences, for example, in Soviet relations with Poland, with all of Western Europe, if

Russia were the only nation retaining nuclear weapons?

As President Reedy, I might share the judgment of these bishops on the evil of nuclear war, the evil of nuclear weapons . . . and still agonize over the steps in the strategy of trying to free the world from these evils.

The Archbishop of Seattle, the Bishop of Amarillo, do not have the same responsibility as the president for the potentially terrible consequences of misjudgment in this strategy.

Probably any sane, ethically sensitive person regrets that these weapons were ever developed. What sane person does not regret the huge waste in an inventory of weapons which, if ever used, would devastate human civilization as we know it?

But even while regretting that we ever saw that first mushroom cloud, such a person can recognize the extreme delicacy of the steps involved in working toward a world in which all nations would honestly and persuasively reject nuclear warfare, no matter what threats and provocations emerged.

A few conclusions which occur to me at this time:

• I hope that religious leaders and other responsible

citizens continue to denounce the moral horror of nuclear arms. I hope they, and the people who listen to them, continue to insist to our leaders that the present situation is unacceptable, intolerable . . . that an acceleration in nuclear weaponry is seen as increasing the probability of worldwide disaster.

• If this sensitivity emerges as the national will, our leaders should recognize that the goal of total nuclear disarmament is the highest priority for this nation, for the world.

• At the same time, responsible citizens and religious leaders should recognize the special burden of responsibility on those who must implement such a policy. A national leader might have to deal with an evil situation without becoming evil himself. While insisting on ethical policies, we have to recognize the problems of conscience which face these leaders.

• It is not easy to do, but it is possible to adhere faithfully and persistently to our convictions regarding God's will for human society without denying that others might conscientiously perceive that will in different decisions.

We need prophetic voices; we need responsible leaders; we do not need intolerant, self-righteous zealots.

## Dinner-Dance Scheduled

Sacred Heart Cathedral has scheduled its New Year's Eve Dinner-Dance to begin at 7 p.m. in the school hall. Music will be provided by Fantasy until 2 a.m., and tickets are \$12.50 per person.

To make reservations, call Mrs. Jean Albano, 647-3655; Mrs. Peggy Best, 647-9758; Mrs. Peggy Zimmer, 865-3488. Deadline for tickets is Dec. 12.

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