

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS LIBERTY ASSOCIATION *

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR THE RESPONSIBLE DISSEMINATION OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

With increasing globalization and growing interreligious and ideological strife, a constructive relationship among religions has become imperative. To deal with these issues, the International Religious Liberty Association convened meetings and conferences of experts, who met in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Spain in 1999 and early 2000 and adopted the following statement on specific points of agreement.

Freedom of religion or belief is a basic human right. Despite the strong support given to this universal right during the past fifty years by the various international instruments, beginning with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of 1948, and including the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* of 1966, the *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief* of 1981, and the *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities* of 1992, widespread violations of this right continue to occur and are to be deplored.

Freedom of religion or belief includes the right to manifest and communicate one's faith or belief to others. Religions have differing beliefs about how they should disseminate their convictions. The question of «proselytizing» or making converts inevitably affects interreligious relations. The term «proselytism» has various meanings and connotations. To avoid ambiguity, hereinafter this document does not use it.

Accepting the increasing reality of religious pluralism and with the aim of strengthening religious liberty, tolerance, dialogue, and respect for equal rights for all, the Conference of Experts suggests the following guiding principles regarding the responsible dissemination of religion or belief. These principles have primarily an ethical character and provide criteria to guide individuals and

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communities in their relations with each other. They also have relevance for relations between religious communities and states. These principles are based on the dignity of the human person and the person's freedom to follow the voice of conscience.

The Conference participants are convinced that the observance of the following guiding principles is invaluable in enhancing a culture of peace, social cohesion, personal and collective responsibility, and the upholding of equal rights for all.

The Conference participants hope that all individuals and religious communities will look at these principles in the light of their own beliefs and practices, and make them their own, thus being fully committed to the divine mandate or high ideals in which they believe.

Principles

1. To teach, manifest, and disseminate one's religion or belief is an established human right. Everyone has the right to attempt to convince others of the truth of one's belief. Everyone has the right to adopt or change religion or belief without coercion and according to the dictates of conscience.

2. Aware of their common responsibilities, religious communities should build relationships through contacts and conversations, manifesting convictions with humility, respect, and honesty. Dialogue should replace confrontation. In witnessing to others or in planning missionary activity, the inviolable dignity of the addressed persons requires consideration of their history, convictions, way of life, and cultural expressions.

3. Religion, faith, or belief is best disseminated when the witness of a person's life is coherent with the message announced, and leads to free acceptance by those to whom it is addressed.

4. In disseminating faith or beliefs, one should be truthful and fair towards other religions and beliefs. This requires comparing the ideals of one's own community with the ideals of other communities, and not with the alleged failures of others.

5. In the dissemination of religion or beliefs, both the rights of majority and minority should be protected in accordance with international human rights instruments which condemn all forms of discrimination and intolerance.

6. In referring to other religious and belief communities, respectful and non-offensive terminology should be used.

7. Social and humanitarian activities should not be linked to the dissemination of faith or beliefs in a way that exploits the poor and vulnerable members of society by offering financial or other material incentives with the intent to induce people to keep or change their religion or belief.

8. While the right to hold and manifest religious beliefs and convictions is recognized, interreligious strife, hatred, and antagonistic religious competition are to be avoided and replaced by dialogue in truth and mutual respect.

9. No one should knowingly make false statements regarding any aspect of other religions, nor denigrate or ridicule their beliefs, practices, or origins. Objective information about these religions is always to be desired in order to avoid the spreading of ill-founded judgments and sweeping prejudices.

10. Dissemination of religious faith or belief should respect the addressed person's freedom to choose or reject a religion or belief without physical or psychological coercion, and should not force that person to break the natural ties with family, which is the foundational component of society.

11. Using political or economic power or facilitating its spread under the guise of disseminating religious faith or belief is improper and should be rejected.

12. Responsible dissemination of religious faith or belief should accept that it may invigorate the faith of the persons or groups addressed, or lead to a free and unfettered choice to change one's religious affiliation.

13. Bearing in mind their responsibilities for the common good of society, religious communities should, where feasible and in harmony with their convictions, join in efforts aimed at improving justice and welfare, and peace among peoples and nations.

14. Where conflicts arise with respect to dissemination of religion or belief, the relevant communities should consider entering into a process of conciliation.

Madrid, January 2000.

Commentaires sur la Déclaration

Cette déclaration est le résultat d'une réflexion qui a été menée depuis le mois de mai 1999 par une vingtaine d'experts qui se sont réunis à l'initiative de l'International Religious Liberty Association (Silver Springs), partenaire de l'Association Internationale pour la défense de la liberté religieuse (Berne).

Ces experts sont des professeurs d'université et des membres d'organisations nationales ou internationales, spécialistes des droits de l'homme. Ils proviennent de dix pays, principalement de l'Europe. Leurs disciplines d'études relèvent surtout du droit, mais aussi de l'histoire, de la sociologie et de la théologie.

La rédaction finale de ce texte a été achevée le 30 janvier 2000. L'original en anglais (joint à la présente) sert de référence officielle. traduit en plusieurs langues, ce document est diffusé avec le consensus des experts qui ont participé à son élaboration.

Bien que sa simple lecture fasse clairement ressortir la perspective qui a présidé à sa rédaction, il me paraît utile d'attirer l'attention sur trois aspects importants:

a) *Ce document prend sa valeur dans le contexte actuel des débats animés autour de la question du «prosélytisme». L'idée que ce moi recouvre a évolué. Dans l'usage commun, aujourd'hui, elle comporte trop souvent une connotation négative;*

b) *en raison de la portée géographico-religieuse mondiale que lui souhaite le groupe des experts, l'usage du terme «évangélisation», dont le sens est fondamentalement chrétien, a aussi été évité. Il lui a été préféré le terme anglais «dissemination», c'est-à-dire, «propagation», «diffusion», dans le sens de «partage» de sa religion ou de sa conviction;*

c) *l'intention des auteurs est de recommander à la réflexion de tous les groupes, institutions, organismes ou individus, à quelque milieux religieux ou philosophique qu'ils appartiennent dans le monde, une ligne de conduite éthique dans les relations interreligieuses et dans toutes les actions de diffusion de leurs croyances. Ce texte n'est pas un document de droit.*

L'Association internationale pour la défense de la liberté religieuse (Berne) formule le vœu que les principes éthiques mis en évidence dans ce document contribuent à sensibiliser les acteurs religieux dans le monde à leur responsabilité. Il leur appartient de pratiquer le respect de la liberté de conscience comme un droit fondamental inaliénable, dans tous leurs rapports avec les autres, individus, communautés, groupes ou Etats. Face aux nouvelles radicalisations des références identitaires, et dans le domaine religieux plus que dans aucun autre, un dialogue humain et honnête est préférable à l'affrontement conflictuel [Maurice Verfaillie, secrétaire général de l'Association internationale pour la défense de la liberté religieuse et membre du groupe des experts].

Berne, le 9 février 2000.

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Secrétaire Général

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