Inter-religious Cooperation and Global Change
From a Clash of Civilisations to a Dialogue of Civilisations

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Samuel P. Huntington's article *A Clash of Civilizations* in 1993 in the journal *Foreign Affairs* started a vast and controversial discussion about the state of the world, the possible clash of civilisations in the context of globalisation. In 1996 Huntington published a more extended and detailed version of his analysis in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* where he states:

“Blood, language, religion, way of life, were what the Greeks had in common and what distinguished them from the Persians and other non-Greeks. Of all the objective elements which define civilizations, however, the most important usually is religion, as the Athenians emphasized. To a very large degree, the major civilizations in human history have been closely identified with the world’s great religions and people who share ethnicity and language but differ in religion may slaughter each other, as happened in Lebanon, the former Yugoslavia, and the Subcontinent.”

As observed by Huntington and many other scholars, religions play a decisive role in the forming of attitudes of individuals and societies towards the ‘other’. Unfortunately religions have contributed all too often in human history to the aggravation of conflicts and wars. Throughout history we can observe brutal acts of individuals in the name of religion and violent groups within religious traditions. Furthermore, we have to make distinctions between diverse world religions that have more or less violence in their histories.

At the same time, we must acknowledge the many examples of caring for the ‘other’ which can be found in all religious traditions. To face the destructive and divisive elements of religions and to foster the inspiring and peace-building elements of religions, more strategic and effective ways of dialogue and cooperation among religions themselves and between the world of politics and religions are needed.

In recent years inter-religious efforts have found prominent support among religious leaders, senior politicians; they are increasingly being taken seriously in the academic world.

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In 1994, former US President Jimmy Carter, in his foreword to Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft, stressed the importance for such dialogue and cooperation:

“Religious representatives need to exercise their moral authority and mobilize the vast human resources of their communities in the service of peacemaking. The rest of us, in turn, must recognize the growing importance of religious factors for peacemaking and develop ways, both informal and formal, to cooperate with religious leaders and communities in promoting peace with justice.”

In order to avoid major future wars, and being aware of the past terrible history of war and violence of humankind, it is imperative to develop commitments in all areas of life to building peace and to dissolving potential for conflict. It is now imperative to build bridges of inter-cultural and inter-religious understanding, dialogue and cooperation, wherever possible, to overcome the social, economic, cultural and religious dynamics that increase the risk of wars. It is imperative to create cultures of peace and justice. It is vital to create the international structures needed to facilitate and co-ordinate dialogue and co-operative efforts across civilisations, cultures and religions.

Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations, highlighted in 1999 the urgent need for dialogue among civilisations and cultures in order to prevent major conflicts and is very supportive of efforts for inter-cultural and inter-religious peace-building.

In a lecture on the 28 June 1999 in the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford on Dialogue of Civilisations and the Need for a World Ethic Annan commented on Huntington’s prediction of a ‘Clash of Civilisations’:

“All sensible people must wish to avoid such a clash. Certainly most Muslim leaders do. Last September one far sighted leader of a Muslim country, President Mohammed Khatami of Iran, made a memorable speech on the subject to the United Nations General Assembly. He said ‘the Islamic Revolution of the Iranian people … calls for a dialogue among civilisations and cultures instead of a clash between them’. At his suggestion, the assembly has since decided to proclaim the year 2001 as the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilisations.”

What future inter-religious efforts should be made to overcome humankind’s terrible history of wars, oppression and discrimination? What changes to the UN System could help to overcome past destructive dynamics?

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We need an expanded UN System that is institutionally able to cooperate fully with civil society, business, social, cultural and religious organisations. In addition, we need a new and permanent inter-religious world forum that, whilst co-operating with the UN System, remains independent from it.

A new World Inter-religious Forum, based on an inter-religious network and co-ordinated by a council, could enhance the existing work of inter-religious organisations and support the best insights, aspirations and programmes of the 100-year old international inter-religious movement. Religious traditions, spiritual movements, indigenous groups and inter-religious organisations could find the necessary global organisational structure to foster permanent, effective and sustainable inter-religious dialogue and cooperation, locally rooted and globally connected.

The role of religions in the context of globalisation has yet to become clear, religions are only beginning to react to the processes of globalisation and they are reacting in a diversity of ways. The two most common reactions are, either, to fall back into fundamentalist and exclusivist positions seeing globalisation as a threat to one’s own identity or superiority, or, secondly, to develop an increasingly respectful or, at least, tolerant attitude to other religions. Both ways of reaction can be observed. There are, for example, the Christian, Hindu and Islamic fundamentalist movements, or, on the other side, the ecumenical and inter-religious movements in the 20th century. A relatively new development is the growing awareness within religious communities that it is the responsibility of religious communities and religious individuals to address today’s global problems. Even more recently, and not yet practised, is the increasing understanding that religions have to address these global problems together.

International institutions have begun to realise the importance of consulting religions in their search for answers to today’s critical global issues. The developments within UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, Cultural Organisation) are a good example where religious and cultural issues have been taken seriously by an international institution and programmes are developed to promote dialogue, cooperation, understanding and respect for a diversity of cultures and religions.
Efforts within UNESCO to Foster Inter-religious and Intercultural Understanding in the Context of the Culture of Peace

In recognition of the increasing threat of conflicts between religions and civilisations in the context of globalisation, UNESCO has given attention to the role of religions and cultures in peace-building to prevent conflicts and to foster peace and cooperation across civilisations, cultures and religions.

Together with the rest of the United Nations System, UNESCO launched the year 2000 as the *International Year for the Culture of Peace* and gave its support in 2001 to the *International Year of Dialogue among Civilizations* that was proclaimed by the UN General Assembly. A summary of the beginning of the developments within UNESCO recognising the role of religions in a *Culture of Peace* is given in the Final Report of the UNESCO Conference on *The Contribution by Religions to the Culture of Peace* which took place in Barcelona, Spain from the 12–18 December 1994.\(^5\)

Since 1993 UNESCO has held several conferences addressing the question of religion in conflict situations and in creating a culture of peace. At the 1994 UNESCO conference in Barcelona (12–18 December) a groundbreaking document, *The Declaration on the Role of Religion in the Promotion of a Culture of Peace*, was issued. This remarkable declaration speaks of the major challenges that the world community faces at the turn of the millennium and addresses the core issues of peace, justice and sustainability. It focuses on the core concerns of the international inter-religious movement: working for peace, preventing conflict, reducing poverty, fostering social justice, providing adequate education, respecting the earth and all living beings, and promoting dialogue and harmony among religions.

In 1998 UNESCO issued a *Report on Follow-up to and Dissemination of the Barcelona Declaration on the Role of Religion in the Promotion of a Culture of Peace*, which attempted to give an assessment of the declaration’s impact. The declaration had found widespread recognition and support, many international organisations had endorsed it, and further meetings on similar subjects had been stimulated. The report noted that, by 1998, 13,408 individuals and 309 institutions had endorsed the declaration.\(^6\)

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5 *The Contribution by Religions to the Culture of Peace*. Final Report, (LD B-22224/95), (Barcelona: Centre UNESCO de Catalunya, 1995).

Within UNESCO there is a Division for Intercultural Dialogue and a Programme on Spiritual Convergence and Intercultural Dialogue, which started the Roads of Faiths project in 1992. International conferences have been held in this context. The UNESCO conference in Rabat, Morocco (1995) focused on the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, whereas the conference in Valetta, Malta (1997) moved towards addressing inter-religious dialogue and understanding in a more pluralistic context. In 1998 a UNESCO seminar Contributions of Religions to the Culture of Peace was held in Grenada, Spain (5 - 11 May). In 1999 an International Forum was held in Bishkek, Kirghyztan on Culture and Religion in Central Asia (13 – 18 September) and in 2000 an International Congress on Interreligious Dialogue took place in Tashkent, Uzbekistan (14 - 16 September 2000).

The examples given of some of UNESCO’s work for peace-building are only part of the many international efforts that are being made all around the globe to change the culture of war and violence in which we presently live. Kosovo, Chechnya, East Timor, the Israel-Palestine conflict, Afghanistan, the Pakistan-India conflict are examples showing that these efforts have not changed the ways in which political and religious tensions feed on each other in many parts of the world. The UNESCO-led movement for a Culture of Peace has the potential to stimulate change in as much as it is achieving its goal of alliance-building across all boundaries. It will need the support of political, educational, social, economic, cultural and religious organisations. Its efforts can have a transforming effect over a long period of time only by seeking peace with justice.

A key element of UNESCO’s World Movement for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence is ‘alliance-building’. There is a widely held consensus today in the world of international organisations that networking and alliance-building are necessary to effectively address global problems. The Appeal for the Establishment of a World Movement for the Culture of Peace and Non-violence states:

“The World Movement must therefore be a ‘grand alliance of existing movements’, a process uniting all those who have been and will be working towards this fundamental transformation of our societies. The aim is to enable every person or organization to contribute to this process of transformation from a culture of violence to a culture of peace,
in terms of values, attitudes and individual behaviour as well as institutional structures and workings.”

UNESCO as a global institution has played a pioneering role in seeking ways to get religious communities and NGOs involved in conflict prevention and peace education. Such a constructive and proactive approach is more promising for peace-building than is waiting passively for the next tragedy to happen.

The impact of inter-religious efforts on the world of politics and religions is still very limited. However, a change of awareness is taking place and a rapid growth of alliances and networks across the field of politics, religions and civil society is foreseeable. More effective alliances and programmes on all levels are needed to create greater understanding between the world of religions and politics, preventing and transforming conflicts. These efforts have to be coordinated with the work of the UN System. This becomes even more important as the world enters a phase in the history of civilisations that might well be more dominated by cultural, ethnic and religious identities than by political ideologies.

**Towards a World Inter-religious Forum:**

**Developing an Inter-religious World Body to Cooperate with the UN System**

How can we address the age-old conflicts between cultures and religions not only on a personal basis, but also on an international institutional level? How should we develop inter-religious organisations that are locally rooted and have an effective global presence?

For more than 100 years, there have been efforts to create inter-religious dialogue and understanding on an international scale.

Organised international inter-religious activities began with the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago, 1893, followed in 1900 by the founding of the first permanent international inter-religious organisation, today’s International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF). Then came the World Congress of Faiths (WCF) in 1936, the World Fellowship of Religions in 1950 in India, the Temple of Understanding (ToU) in 1960, the World Conference on Religions and Peace (WCRP) in 1970, the Council for a Parliament

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7 *Global Movement for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence*, UNESCO Information Kit, p.4.
of the World’s Religions in 1988 (CPWR), the International Interfaith Centre (IIC) in 1993, the United Religions Initiative (URI) in 1996, the Interfaith Center of New York in 1997, the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) in 1998, and the Millennium World Peace Summit in 2000, to name the more prominent or permanent ones. The amount of inter-religious activity at local, national and international levels rapidly increased through the 20th century.

In particular, the International Association for Religious Freedom, the Temple of Understanding, the World Conference on Religions and Peace, the Interfaith Center of New York and the Millennium World Peace Summit have cooperated successfully with the UN System. The IARF, ToU and WCRP have consultative status at the UN.

As soon as the first global organisations emerged in the political field, the League of Nations and the United Nations, some of the pioneers and leaders of the inter-religious movement thought about how to relate to these global political bodies. How to relate to global organisations and the challenges of globalisation is still a key question for today’s international inter-religious movement.

Today there is an emerging movement for global inter-religious understanding and cooperation on the critical issues of our time. To achieve lasting global change, innovative partnerships across traditional boundaries are needed. In this context alliance-building among key partners is crucial to achieve innovative and transformative cooperation on a local and global level: We need alliances among

- religious communities
- transnational civil society (including inter-national inter-religious organisations)
- the UN System and other international agencies.

New structures (networks, fora, councils) are needed to facilitate and sustain such ongoing cooperation. Numerous inter-religious seminars, major conferences and conference series have been held all around the world for over a century. There is still a great need for research into the immense amount of inter-religious activity that has taken place in Asia (especially India and Japan) to produce a fuller historical account of inter-religious developments. In addition to the work of inter-religious organisations the efforts of particular faith communities to open dialogues with other faiths and to change their centuries-old attitudes of exclusion must be recognised.
The existing multitude of different inter-religious initiatives, organisations and programmes brings its own advantages and challenges. The advantage is a diversity of approaches with different priorities and diverse leaderships. Nevertheless, as we rapidly grow towards a more and more interconnected world community, it is necessary to undertake coordinated efforts to effectively address together the great suffering, injustices and inequalities amongst our fellow brothers and sisters. Wars, hunger, poverty, epidemic diseases, environmental destruction and exploitation, widespread lack of education and adequate housing, innumerable forms of human injustice, exploitation and oppression demand of all people of good-will to balance their personal priorities with the necessity to overcome these evils. Only by joining forces, by creating synergies, by sharing new insights and traditional wisdom, coming from a diversity of civilisations and religions can the immense injustices and dangers that threaten our life community on this planet be addressed successfully.

This argument should be even more obvious for inter-religious organisations and religious communities that by nature of their ideals and principles want to serve humanity. If it is the aim of inter-religious organisations and religious communities to work for understanding, peace and justice, to work for dialogue and respect of the ‘other’, then they have to put these ideals into effective practice and seek cooperation with all people of good-will. Otherwise, they will clearly be placing their own priorities above the well-being of humankind. This would be in contradiction to many principles of their own organisations or their respective faith communities.

Therefore, it is high time to overcome age-old divisions and to seek together new forms of effective, just and global cooperation and to establish the necessary structural frameworks, institutions and processes to make such global inter-religious cooperation possible and sustainable.

Conclusions

A multi-centred, permanent World Network, Forum and Council for religious traditions, spiritual movements, indigenous traditions and inter-religious organisations is needed. This is the argument made here. Such a permanent, inter-religious world body, respecting regional and local diversity, would have to be multi-centred and include a diversity of organisational forms. It should be based on a global inter-religious network, with permanent, co-ordinating centres on every continent, with a global inter-religious
coordination council, with a general assembly or forum held every two years and regional assemblies in the years between general assemblies. It should include humanitarian, research and media institutions; it would need to be supported by local and national groups and involve committed citizens as well as religious and spiritual leaders.

A World Inter-religious Forum, based on a network and coordinated by a council, could also help a wide diversity of programmes and initiatives to emerge in creative response to today’s great problems and long-term challenges, such as poverty, lack of education, epidemic diseases, war, the environmental crisis, conflict among religions, the root causes of terrorism, unjust economic systems, etc. It would need to be independent but have structural links to the UN System to be globally effective and to be able to facilitate peace-building, dialogue encounters, information exchanges and cooperative activities with the world of politics and economics. One of the most difficult challenges would be the question of representation, as it is not possible to find in the world of religions and spirituality clear criteria for who represents the multitude of religious traditions and spiritual paths. The representation in the forum and council should be based on the participation in a global inter-religious network, with additional places for large and clearly identifiable religious, spiritual or indigenous communities and for outstanding and widely recognised moral and spiritual leaders.

Such a network, forum and council would not be realised within a few years and would not be able to perfectly represent all religious, spiritual and indigenous groups. However, a development in this direction with a critical mass of initial participants could be realised within 5 to 10 years if the will towards global inter-religious cooperation can be further mobilised. To achieve this the support of the major inter-religious organisations, of religious communities and of key religious and spiritual leaders is crucial.

Has the visionary dream to create a “League of Religions which shall be the counterpart and ally of the political League of Nations”\(^8\), a hope expressed by leaders of the International Association for Religious Freedom in 1920, come closer to its realisation? Can a response be given today to the vision of a better world formulated by former Indian President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975)? He was during his distinguished career

President of India (1961–1967), Chairman of the Executive Board of UNESCO in the 1950s and a lecturer in comparative religions in Oxford in the 1930s. He summarised powerfully today’s imperative to develop a greater sense of the unity of humankind, to establish adequate global institutions to foster and facilitate such an awareness and in doing so to empower people to act together decisively on the major challenges of our time, for the common good of the whole world community:

“We should like our generation to go down in history not as the one which split the atom or made the hydrogen bomb but as the one which brought together the peoples of the world and transformed them into a world community. Now that the nations have come to each other’s doorsteps, we have to develop new methods of human relationships. If civilization is to endure, understanding amongst peoples is essential. The world has got together as a body, it is groping for its soul. We need psychological unity, spiritual coherence. We are eager to promote peace and concord among men through several international agencies. The UNO, ILO, UNESCO, WHO are some of them. If we can have a United Nations Organization, cannot we have a United Religions Organization? Unfortunately, while all religions proclaim faith in righteous living, international peace and the brotherhood of men, they are unwilling to co-operate with one another. They compete with one another and keep their followers apart. The world has shrunk and different religions are facing one another. To get them into a fellowship is an imperative necessity. Though we may have our special loyalties, we may appreciate whatever is true, noble, lovely and of good report.”

No duplicate organisation to the UN is proposed here in my argument, since the world of religious traditions and communities is too different from the world of nations and international law. The proposition here is to create an inter-religious forum and network organisation that can pragmatically serve the common good of humankind in cooperation with the UN System, enhancing the prospects for a more just and peaceful world community.

The nations of the world have made over the last 82 years (first through the League of Nations and now through the United Nations) efforts to move towards a world community, efforts with many setbacks, interrupted by World War II and seriously limited by the Cold War period and today’s major economic differences.

However, even today the United Nations System is seen as rather helpless in the face of global problems and in most cases the political and economic interests of individual nation states determine the decisions or, sometimes, the absence of decisions. In reality we cannot yet speak of a world community, rather of a crises management system trying to address

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major world problems, most often with too little power and resources, and often too late. Could a renewed United Nations System, which is more democratic in its structures and significantly expanded in order to cooperate with and empower NGOs and civil society organisations, religious communities and movements, be more effective in achieving the stated goal of the United Nations to save ‘succeeding generations from the scourge of war’ and in addressing the great challenges of our time? The answer is a clear yes. No isolated part of the emerging global community can hope to solve today’s global problems on its own. The ethical and spiritual resources of religious and spiritual traditions are needed to address interconnected and global issues like justice, peace and sustainability.

One of the most difficult aspects of a transformation of the United Nations System is to change the organisation from a predominantly government-orientated global institution towards a much more open and inclusive institution. The necessary changes to the legal framework of the United Nations and, possibly, amendments to the UN Charter, clearly pose immense challenges which seem almost impossible to achieve given the strong self-interests of nation states.

Yet, it is an absolute necessity to find an answer to one of the crucial clarification processes of our time: how can we foster and facilitate today, both, through existing and new international organisations and institutions a more peaceful, just, and sustainable future of humankind? Are the existing national, international and global institutions and organisations good enough and up to the challenges of globalisation?

Anybody who looks at today’s state of the world can come to only one conclusion: humanity has failed bitterly in managing its own affairs, in creating institutions that will safeguard a peaceful, just and fulfilling life for the world’s citizens on the local, national and global level.

Global change through creating new international institutions must be accompanied by a substantial change within the UN System. This would create the capacity within the UN System for meaningful institutional cooperation and alliance–building with wider parts of the world community.

In the 1997 John W. Holmes Memorial Lecture on The Imperative of Idealism, hosted by the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS), James S. Sutterlin comes to a conclusion that is increasingly held by many scholars and NGO activists:
“civil society must be given a participatory role in the United Nations and one large enough to give the people a sense of responsibility for the organization. As is well-known, this is not a new idea. I would add only the insistence that to bring about a new image of the UN as representative of peoples’ as well as governments’ interests, civil society must be involved in some way in the decision-making process, perhaps in the form of a second advisory chamber of the General Assembly, where the focus would be on the liberal agenda of the UN System rather than on the machinery for its implementation.”

We have touched on diverse issues in the argument presented here: inter-religious cooperation, global change, global governance issues, participation of civil society in the UN System and the creation of new international institutions and frameworks. Whilst the complex details that are crucial for implementing any institutional change have not been addressed here a vision for facing today’s global crises has been presented. Religious and spiritual individuals all over the world have together begun to reflect and to act on their global responsibilities, so that we can live in a more peaceful, just and sustainable world community. A better future is achievable by human beings united in their respect for diversity.

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