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**The Contribution of Interreligious Initiatives to Human Rights Education**

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*Abstract*

*Starting point of this paper is the declaration of the First World Assembly of the international movement Religions for Peace/RfP (former World Conference on Religion and Peace/WCRP) 1970 in Kyoto/Japan where representatives of religions from many parts of the world came together (during the middle of the Cold War). Human Rights were one of the central concerns from the very beginning of the movement: The declaration’s focus on the equality and dignity of all human beings corresponds with the 1st article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, pointing out the inviolability of the individual and their conscience concerning the rights to freedom of belief, underlining the solidarity of the poor and oppressed with the vision of the human family. But also values and behaviors have been referenced which are particularly at home in the religions: Love, compassion, selflessness, the power of the mind… The paper will explain how these ideas have spread out during the development of the interreligious movement – and have been recognized as a challenge for education. The Sixth World Assembly in 1994, conducted in the Vatican, initiated the establishment of the Peace Education Standing Commission (PESC) within RfP of which professor Lähnemann is the chair and in which interreligious peace education projects and endeavor are documentated to bring them into discussion with one another. It is explained how in interreligious cooperation impulses can be given for human rights education – on the international, the national and the local level.*

**1. Introduction: a unique prayer meeting**

It was the summer of 2011. We were approaching 11 September, the tenth anniversary of the devastating attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington. We began to consider: On this day, could we set a unique example in our city – the place from which the National Socialist regime's racial policies were once sent out and which is now establishing a reputation as a city of human rights – with our Nuremberg group of Religions for Peace (Religionen für den Frieden Nürnberg)?

We noticed that some young Muslims were wearing t-shirts bearing the slogan 'Terrorism has no religion!' That was the key message for us: 'Terrorism has no religion!' We considered further: Would a mosque be willing to act as the host for a multi-faith prayer meeting? Would a representative of the Jewish community, the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde, come to the mosque for the meeting? What about religions other than the three religions who traditionally would come together for such meetings – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – such as Buddhism, Hinduism and the Baha'i faith? Furthermore, could we find prayers, songs and texts from the holy scriptures which highlighted our message, terrorism has no religion?

This was followed by many telephone calls, consultation sessions and an intense search for sources. The journey was rather adventurous at times but in the end the event was very moving and impressive.

The host was the DITIB mosque on Kurfürstenstraße, as arranged by the mosque community's spokesperson. Each religious community made a contribution, either spoken or in song. Contributions came from the imam, a Catholic lay woman, a representative of the Baha'i community, the sheik of the Muslim Mevlana community, a Hindu priest and a yoga teacher, the religious teacher from the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde, the dean of the Lutheran church, the Roman Orthodox priest and a representative of the Buddhist centre. Dr. Günther Beckstein, the former Bavarian Prime Minister, gave a greeting on behalf of the state government.

The fact that this prayer meeting was an example of interreligious learning with human rights was already clear in the Jewish opening prayer, for which Rabbi Jonathan Magonet is to thank:

“Eternal God, the Guide of humanity. You have called us to peace, for You are Peace itself. May we have the vision to see that each of us, in some measure, can help to realize these aims.

Where there are ignorance and superstition, let there be enlightenment and knowledge,

Where there are prejudice and hatred, let there be acceptance and love,

Where there are fear and suspicion, let there be confidence and trust,

Where there are tyranny and oppression, let there be freedom and justice,

Where there are poverty and disease, let there be prosperity and health,

Where there are strife and discord, let there be harmony and peace.”

(Lähnemann/Religionen für den Frieden Nürnberg, 2014, pp. 176–177)

Searching for peace, for understanding to combat ignorance, for freedom and justice against tyranny and oppression, for well-being instead of poverty, all of these are goals that are implied in human rights and which we committed ourselves to together at this opportunity.

The journey which led to such a clear demonstration of religions working together was long, and to understand this requires a short overview of the main movement, Religions for Peace (RfP), previously called the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP), as follows.

**2. World Conference on Religion and Peace/Religions for Peace – A long journey**

In 1970, 300 representatives from religions from many parts of the world came together in Kyoto for the first time. This was made possible due to many years of effort which mainly stemmed from India, the USA and Japan. In Japan, soon after the Second World War, the terrible atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had led various religious communities to look for ways to work together. The movement which led to WCRP has always received a great amount of financial support from here. It was a great achievement to bring religious leaders from the east and west together during the middle of the Cold War and the ongoing Vietnam War. The fact that human rights were one of the central concerns from the very beginning is clearly documented in the book *History of the World Conference on Religion and Peace* by the first general secretary Homer Jack (1993). This is also clear in the first interreligious declaration that was adopted in Kyoto:

“We found that we share:

- a conviction of the fundamental unity of the human family, and the equality and dignity of all human beings;

- a sense of the sacredness of the individual person and his conscience;

- a sense of the value of the human community;

- a realization that might is not right; that human power is not self-sufficient and absolute;

- a belief that love, compassion, selflessness, and the force of inner truthfulness and of the spirit have ultimately greater power than hate, enmity, and self-interest;

- a sense of obligation to stand on the side of the poor and the oppressed as against the rich and the oppressors;

- a profound hope that good will finally prevail.” (Jack, 1993, p. 438)

'The equality and dignity of all human beings.' This corresponds exactly to the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The inviolability of the individual and their conscience corresponds to the rights to freedom which are addressed in various parts of the Declaration of Human Rights; the same applies to solidarity with the poor and the oppressed. However, another distinguishing characteristic is that values and behaviours are referenced which are particularly at home in the religion: love, compassion, selflessness, the power of the mind. It becomes clear here that work towards human rights requires specific, deeply rooted motivations in order to pursue it with sobriety but also with passion and patience. This can be linked with a statement in the first article of the Declaration of Human Rights which says that people should meet one another in the spirit of brotherhood.

After it was initially unclear whether WCRP would be able to establish itself in the long-term, with a great deal of effort, a second world conference was held in Leuven, Belgium, in 1974. Here too, the relationship to human rights played an important role, as peace and the development of the basic conditions for peace were given special attention. Dr. Maria Lücker, a key campaigner for WCRP in Germany, had published the book *Religionen, Frieden, Menschenrechte* (Religions, Peace, Human Rights) (1971) in advance of the conference. Commissions for specific action programmes were envisaged. At the same time, against the backdrop of the Cold War, it was always difficult to name violations of human rights directly, particularly for the participating delegates of the Soviet Union and the East European states that feared reprisals in their home countries if too specific accusations were made.

The next conference, with a special focus on Third World countries, took place in 1979 in Princeton, USA, close to the United Nations which had by then accredited WCRP as an NGO. It included a visit to the White House where the participants were met by President Jimmy Carter. A Chinese delegation came for the first time, and there was a special focus on the subject of nuclear disarmament but also the disarmament of conventional weapons. The spiritual dimension – prayers and reflections from the religions – was included more strongly than in the first two world conferences.

The fourth world conference in 1984 took place in Africa for the first time, namely in Nairobi, Kenya. Archbishop Desmond Tutu confronted the delegates with the reality of apartheid in South Africa and with the necessity of meeting this with interreligious co-operation. The continent's developmental and environmental problems also played a key role. By now no less than 60 countries were represented with 600 delegates, and an international youth committee was established.

The fifth world conference was then held on the fifth continent in January 1989 in Melbourne, Australia. It was the first conference that I took part in myself and where I was able to process the task of peace education through the religions in a separate commission area. Franz Brendle was also present, after we had established WCRP Germany several months earlier and he had been elected chair, while Norbert Klaes in Würzburg, moderator of WCRP Europe, and Günther Gebhardt, secretary general of WCRP Europe in Geneva (with secretary general John Taylor), had already been contributing at the international level for a long time. In Melbourne, particular emphasis was placed on the participation of aboriginal people and on considering the indigenous religions.

At the sixth world conference in 1994, we were greeted by Pope John Paul II in the hall of the Bishops' Synod in Rome. When he entered the hall and saw the diverse audience, which included a Native American chief from North America, he smiled as he said to his companions, 'The other Bishops' Synod'. This conference was continued in Riva del Garda where Dr. William Vendley was elected secretary general – and since then chairs and organizes the work of Religions for Peace together with his staff at the secretariat in New York (close to the United Nations / see www.religionsforpeace.org). The conference provided – among other items - the momentum for long-term systematic work in important subject areas, which led to the establishment of the Peace Education Standing Commission (PESC), of which I am chair and in which we document interreligious peace education projects and endeavour to bring them into discussion with one another.

The seventh world conference was held in 1999 in Amman, Jordan, and opened in the presence of King Abdullah II. Along with his uncle, Prince Hassan bin Talal, he is without a doubt one of the most committed advocates of peace in the Middle East. Both of them are also strongly committed to protecting Christians. At the time, the participants were filled with hope in the wake of the Oslo process. For example, rabbis from Israel went to the Christian Theodor Schneller School in Amman. Then the Second Intifada destroyed many of these hopes. It was moving how, in an educational pre-conference talk, Rabbi Howard Bogot presented his book *Schalom, Salaam, Peace* (1999) which makes childhood dreams of peace visible, with accompanying text in Arabic, Hebrew and English – an example of efforts to use education to break down borders and create a vision of dignified living which also considers the needs of children .

For the eighth world conference in 2006, WCRP – which was now known as Religions for Peace (RfP) as the work was not only related to the conferences – returned to the place where it all began, Kyoto in Japan. 800 delegates from 100 countries met for a conference with the title 'Shared Security', during which the fears and dangers in many conflict regions were given special attention. Outside of the main conference, religious leaders from countries such as Iraq, Israel and Palestine, North and South Korea, Sudan and Sri Lanka held direct talks about the problems with violence in their countries. In a resolution, the conference adopted the mission of the *Global Ethic Project* set up by Hans Küng as its own. The preceding women's conference was dedicated to the problem of violence against children and the youth conference started the *Arms Down project* which continues to collect signatures from across the world in protest of unlimited arms exports today.

The ninth world conference took place in Vienna in November 2013. The topic of the conference was 'Welcoming the Other: Action for Human Dignity, Citizenship and Shared Well-being'. The main concerns of the Declaration of Human Rights are also of current relevance as part of this topic – with the emphasis on human dignity, civil rights for all and well-being based on solidarity. The relevance of this topic to the current situation lies in the fact that there remain many problem regions in which, instead of a culture of welcoming, a culture of hate between nations, religions and systems is dominant. Delegates from civil war-torn Syria took part, as did religious representatives from Israel and Palestine, from Myanmar, from areas of tension in Africa, and even from North and South Korea. Alternative ways of thinking and acting were a matter of urgency in the discussions, declarations and pledges.

I chaired the commission tasked with bringing the topic up-to-date for education. We were concerned with how a lack of understanding of one another in religious communities often leads to prejudice and one-sided perceptions, which can easily be misused for radicalisation. This results in a challenge for education to overcome ignorance and misconceptions and to thereby counteract animosity and hostility between different cultures and religious groups.

The basic paper developed in the commission explains:

* “Religions are concerned with giving meaning to life, interpreting the world, and are not only focused on short-term goals.
* 'Welcoming the Other' should draw on the spiritual, ethical and social potential of religious communities.
* Tasks for religious communities in this respect are first to vitalize their own principles of belief in an open way that opposes intolerance.
* At the same time, all religious/ethical education should be accompanied by a new approach to engagement that respects and appreciates people of other faiths as well as their values and ways of life.”

Therefore, a key goal is to emphasise the importance of using the spiritual traditions of the different religions as a living source for long-term, responsible and fruitful co-operation. In order to do this, educational collaborations between different religious communities, but also between religious communities and public education in schools and education institutions, were suggested.

This was included in the closing declaration 'The Vienna Declaration – Welcoming the Other – A Multi-Religious Vision of Peace':

Our respective religious communities can become centres of religious education on 'welcoming the other': To do this, we must reclaim our own religious teachings that call us to welcome the other, widely share them among our respective faith communities, including our young people, and put them into practice.

([www.rfp.org/sites/.../Vienna%20Declaration%20-%20Final.pdf](http://www.rfp.org/sites/.../Vienna%20Declaration%20-%20Final.pdf))

The principles of this declaration have been more elaborated in the brochure “The role of interreligious education in overcoming fear and building trust” which was launched at the European Assembly of RfP in Castel Gandolfo/Italy in October 2015 (Lähnemann, 2015), describing spiritual and moral dispositions which can be trained through religious and inter-religious education and giving examples of best practice in schools as well as in other public fields of education.

What has not yet been shown in this short overview is that in addition to the global-scale interreligious councils, there are also round tables of religions and activities at the level of individual continents, nations and even in our communities, which are working on human rights issues in their own way. This will be discussed later. First we should address the question: Have the interreligious initiatives been able to achieve something?

**3. Interreligious initiatives – Failure and success**

Religions for Peace is a movement with committed members, groups and working groups in many countries. However, it has not been able to prevent terrible things from happening, such as the divide in Cyprus, the long civil war in Lebanon, the troubles in Northern Ireland, the war in former Yugoslavia, the massacre in Rwanda, the entrenched fronts in Israel and Palestine – not least the civil war in Syria and the terrorism of the so called IS (“Islamic State” in Iraq and Syrian territories) – all of which are associated with massive violations of human rights, as well as discrimination against and persecution of religious minorities in many countries. Often a kind of national religious affliction plays a large role here – an unquestioned linking of national culture, religion and politics, whereby representatives of the ruling religious group marginalise the other groups, sometimes even want to eliminate them, and radicalise large sections of their communities.

This is also reflected in the interreligious work being carried out in our city.

Each of the religious communities represented in Nuremberg has its own stories of negative incidents that members of their faith have experienced and are experiencing.

* For example, for a long time the group had a member who was a young Egyptian who had been thrown from a train by a radical Muslim group because he had become a Christian. He lost his arm as a result.
* There were Bosnian Muslims from former Yugoslavia where mosques were destroyed and 'ethnic cleansing' took place.
* The members of the Buddhist centre in Fürth, the city next to Nuremberg, have a high-ranking Tibetan lama as a teacher who was forced to leave his home as a young man together with the Dalai Lama.
* The Baha'i have relatives and acquaintances in Iran who have been imprisoned because of their faith.
* The Hindu temple in the south of Nuremberg was set up by families of Tamil refugees who were forced to leave their home in northern Sri Lanka.
* Finally, the interreligious work clearly cannot ignore the difficult history that the Jews went through in Nuremberg.

Yet we can also talk of stories which are the opposite of these.

It is not well known enough that Christians, Muslims and Hindus in South Africa worked together to help overcome apartheid; that the civil war in Sierra Leone was only able to come to an end because interreligious councils mediated between the government and the rebels; that Mozambique could only be led to democracy through the many years of patient peace efforts of the Catholic St Egidio movement; that in Sri Lanka the Buddhist Sarvodaya movement is represented in over 15,000 villages with an open, interreligious education and development programme. We should also remember the important contributions the peace prayers in former East Germany (the German Democratic Republic) made to German Reunification in 1989/1990.

The book *Religions and World Peace: Religious Capacities for Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding* (Czadam, Held & Weingardt, 2012)containsfurther positive examples and deserves to be a bestseller.

**4. Interreligious raising of awareness – New approaches in dialogue**

In the background of all of the examples given is a process of raising awareness, one could say a process of conversion, which the religious communities that have had problems with human rights for long enough have had to undergo and must continue to do so.

One of the fundamental commitments of the Religions for Peace movement is to work towards ensuring peace, equality and dignity for people of all religions and beliefs. It is a fundamental commitment for religious people as a whole to work to ensure that the religions themselves do their homework in this area.

In order to do so, it helps to bring to mind the spiritual foundations of our religions. In their own unique ways they can each be a source of strength and motivation to campaign for freedom, equality and dignity for others.

*Freedom:* For people of faith who see their lives as a gift from God this means, above all, freedom from selfishness, from egocentricity, from only focusing on our own gains. For Buddhists it is freedom from holding on to what is transient. It is freedom from idolising possession and power, which always come at the cost of others. Freedom is also freedom of thought. The Qur'an says 'there is no compulsion in religion' – and all religions know that a true, sincere choice for a faith can only ever be a voluntary choice.

It was therefore logical when, at the first large dialogue conference of the World Council of Churches in Chambesy near Geneva in 1977, it was stated that Muslims and Christians alike must have the unrestricted right to convince and to be convinced, and to live out their faith and organise their religious life in accordance with their religious obligations and principles (Abdullah, 1981, p. 27). Regrettably, there are too many countries in which this fundamental right is not granted.

*Equality:* In Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the Baha'i faith (and equally in the Zoroastrian and the Sikh religion), the belief in God as the creator means that God made all people equal, as one big family, as it is said in a central Baha'i prayer. In the Bible, St. Paul uses the image of the body with different limbs which have different tasks but can only form a body by working together (1 Corinthians 12); and he emphasises that the weaker limbs should be given special honour. Buddha taught that people belong together and should be in solidarity with all things that live and exist.

When equality is understood as equal dignity, it is clear that the widening gap between the very rich and the very poor is an appalling injustice, and it is an urgent task for churches and other religious communities to campaign for the reduction of debt for the world's poorest countries. Symbolic leaders are also incredibly important, such as Mahatma Gandhi, who took equality so seriously that he could call himself a street sweeper of India. He encouraged all of the members of his ashram, even Brahmans, to clean their own toilets. He himself adopted an untouchable girl.

*Dignity:* This is demonstrated when every human being is respected as a person with abilities and weaknesses, and when the needy in particular are not lost. Jesus presented the example of a child to his disciples. The openness and dependency of a child makes it clear that people are not accepted by God because of their abilities but because of their need for love. This makes actions which help children a particularly important task for religions. They must not accept children being neglected and exploited, with such terrible practices as child labour in mines and child prostitution, or that they are put a risk of suffering from neglect in a society dominated by consumerism and 'spiritual pollution'.

The interreligious work carried out here is a practice ground that the believers from the different religions can come to in freedom, equality and dignity. When we visit one another in churches, mosques, synagogues and temples, we begin to understand what is important for the others' faiths and why it is important. When we hold conversations with one another, we see the prejudices and the burdens we bear in terms of our history. We give one another the sign of our faith and recognise what unites us and what makes us different. We then often understand our own faith better and more clearly. We discover where we can work together: for freedom of religions, for equal rights in education, against xenophobia and intolerance.

**5. Interreligious human rights education in practice: global, national, local**

The final part of this report will present practical examples of how projects in interreligious human rights education can be carried out.

* On an international level, the Women of Faith Network – part of Religions for Peace – has created the Restoring Dignity project, led by Ravinder Nijjar, a Scottish woman of the Sikh religion, and Yolande Iliano, the European president of RfP in Brussels. These women have identified what world religions teach – each in their own way – about the inviolable dignity of women, set down in the different holy scriptures. They have organised meetings and exhibitions, have set up an active online platform ([www.rfpwomenoffaith.eu](http://www.rfpwomenoffaith.eu)) and encourage communities, institutions and individuals to become actively involved in putting an end to violence against women and girls.
* On a global level, it is also particularly worth mentioning the Global Ethic project started by Hans Küng (www.weltethos.org), a project whose mission Religions for Peace made its own at the 2006 world conference in Kyoto. The Golbal Ethic Project does not intend to write a new version of human rights, instead it is a complementary plan to identify and promote the attitudes that are necessary in order to ensure that human rights are respected, based on the ethical traditions found in religions. Commitments to a culture of non-violence and respect for all life, to a culture of solidarity and a fair economic system, to a culture of truthfulness and tolerance, and finally to a culture of partnership and equality between men and women, are the four main areas which can be identified both in the ten commandments of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths and in the commitments of the layperson in Buddhism. The Global Ethic Project has snowballed, both in theory and in practice. It has inspired political ethics, economic ethics, ecological ethics and even musical culture, and its footprints can now be found in school curricula, text books and teacher training programmes. It has foundations in several countries and a university institute not only in Tübingen but also in Beijing.
* At a national level in Germany there is the round table of religions (www.religionsforpeace.de/?id=rundertisch) which includes high-profile representatives of the Christian churches (Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox), Islamic associations, the Jewish community, the Baha'i faith and the Buddhists. Human rights, in particular the right to freedom of religion, are often discussed here. The round table addresses current issues and organises an annual 'Day of Religions' in and with a German city, and the local interreligious initiatives run by the various religions introduce themselves to the public in this context. At the Ökumenischer Kirchentag (Ecumenical Church Day, a big popular event) in Munich in 2010, the round table published a manifesto entitled 'Vertrauen schaffen, Vertrauen wagen' (Building Trust, Daring to Trust), along with a pledge which includes the following commitment to human rights (translated from the German):

“At the Ecumenical Church Day in Munich we declare:

1. We want to build new trust with one another and
2. use the opportunities to confront pressing global problems together.
3. We want to set an example for the right to freedom of religion, faith and thought in a comprehensive sense. We want to campaign for those who are persecuted and disadvantaged due to their faith, especially those who are persecuted and disadvantaged by other religions.
4. We want to campaign for learning and development opportunities for young people, for structures in which children can know love, security and protection as a basis for a responsible life. All efforts to strengthen families and to design kindergartens and schools as living spaces should be promoted, as should the required interreligious learning.
5. We want to face the challenges of globalisation together with all of society's strength. Economic growth requires, alongside an economic perspective, a social and ecological perspective. From a religious and ethical point of view especially, profit maximisation must not have the final say, but rather the criteria must be how justice can be guaranteed for the weaker and the disadvantaged and how everyone can make their contribution to the common good.”

Unfortunately, it is much more difficult to attract media attention with such de-clarations than with the news of problems and catastrophes – and increased recognition of this work on a political level is also desirable.

* Human rights need commitment from individuals and groups who feel an obligation to uphold them. Each and every individual is required to consider what he or she can contribute, but so is society on the whole. Working together can strengthen us in this respect. It is for this reason that work within communities is so important, such as the work carried out by the Nuremberg group of Religions for Peace (www.rfp-nuernberg.de). It is work which needs allies on different levels. For example, the Nuremberg group has joined the project 'Bäume für Menschenrechte' (trees for human rights) and planted a gingko tree for the right to freedom of religion in the courtyard at Caritas-Pirckheimer-Haus. The 13 groups of Religions for Peace in Germany have joined many such alliances in order to become more effective and to increase awareness of the religious aspects of human rights work within these alliances.

For the work in Nuremberg, drawing on the spiritual resources of the various religious traditions which inspire people to stand up for human rights together has become particularly important. This is made clear in the topics of the multi-faith prayer meetings which the group has celebrated in various churches in the city, and in mosques too, and which have been summarised in a book published to mark the group's 25th anniversary (Lähnemann/Religionen für den Frieden Nürnberg 2014). Examples include (translated from the German):

*Be hospitable, do not forget – Religions standing up for the persecuted*

*Religions, human rights, routes to friendship*

*Preserving life – Religions working together for peace and justice*

The connection between spirituality and ecology was also an important subject for discussion – such as in the topic *Let us protect the earth*.

At the same time, we are challenged by the fact that it is necessary to complement human rights with animal rights and environmental rights, to stand up for creation and our natural resources, without which human rights work comes to nothing.

This message was included in the Nuremberg declaration of religions on preserving life, which is reproduced in the brochure 'Offene Türen. Religionsgemeinschaften in Nürnberg und Umgebung' (Open doors: Religious communities in Nuremberg and the surrounding area) (2008, p. 70). It concludes by saying (translated from the German):

“Do not forget that each one of our lives is a precious opportunity! Let us acknowledge that each of us is unique with their own gifts and talents, but also with their own need for love and companionship. And at the same time, we are connected with all living things, are blessed with the sun, wind and rain, with growth and prosperity. In awareness of the diversity and beauty of the lively and yet so troubled world, we want to share in the responsibility for the life around us and across the whole earth.”

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