



PARLIAMENTARY FORUM  
ON SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS

## Policy Statement on Religion and Violence

The Board of the Parliamentary Forum of Small Arms and Light Weapons, meeting in Managua, Nicaragua on October 24, 2009;

Throughout history religion has been used as a pretext for conflict, violence and war. From the Christian – Islamic wars in the 11<sup>th</sup> - 14<sup>th</sup> centuries and the Thirty Years' War between Protestants and Catholics in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the contemporary Arab-Israeli conflict, the troubles between Catholic and Protestant Christians in Northern Ireland and the Hindu–Islamic hostilities in India, religion has been a factor which fuels conflict.

During the Cold War, religion was a less prominent factor in international conflict, which instead hinged around political ideology and geo-political tension between the two super-powers. In many parts of the world, the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of tension between religious and secular authorities, which in some cases created barriers between the two. In other cases prominent religious and secular figures were able, using dialogue, to assist the development of important principles of Human Rights and democracy.

However, since the end of the Cold War, religion has re-entered both the world stage as well as conflict areas, often presenting a challenge to the principles of secularisation developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The re-appearance of religion in political conflicts is not necessarily an expression of the “Clash of Civilisations”, as claimed by some academic scholars, nor a return to the historical antagonisms that were experienced in earlier times, in which political and religious powers merged in order to demonise an opponent. Furthermore, it is not necessarily the case that there is a tension between religious and secular authorities, although examples of such clashes do appear.

It is rather the case that the world is experiencing a split between religions and cultures. Within all religions there are groups who, well rooted in their own traditions, are willing to reach out and engage in dialogue with other cultures in order to develop common values and principles and address the challenges of globalisation and societies' increasing multiculturalism. At the same time, there are other groups who introvert themselves within their traditions due to their belief that they constitute the only truth, consequently dividing humanity into “true believers” and “infidels”.

Traditional, secular political institutions have often proved themselves unprepared to meet or even understand the re-emergence of religion in political life and conflicts. This is partly a result of the secular view of religion as a purely private matter and hence separated from political life.

It is true, that certain aspects of religion should be seen as private. Spiritual experiences are matters for individuals to deal with. Theology and the interpretation of faith are issues for individuals, religious institutions and universities to consider and should also normally be separated from political life. However, religion is also an expression of social ethics, human relations and human identity. Along with ethnicity, nationality, language and class, religion is often an important part of a person's identity and in such cases can therefore be considered an essential bearer of culture, tradition and history as well as a major social force that serves to bind a community together.

Such dimensions of religion are thus political issues and cannot merely be relegated to the realm of individuals or religious institutions. There must therefore be a political awareness and interaction with religions in order both to make use of their possible contribution to peaceful development, as well as counteract their potentially destructive role in situations of political tension.

In a historic speech at Cairo University on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 2009, the President of the United States of America, Barack Obama, addressed the Muslim world stating that: *“So long as our relationship is defined by our differences, we will empower those who sow hatred rather than peace, those who promote conflict rather than the cooperation that can help all of our people achieve justice and prosperity. And this cycle of suspicion and discord must end.”* Realising the difficulties lying ahead, he pressed for open-hearted dialogue and mutual understanding between Americans and Muslims from all over the world.

Religious leaders have held important positions in peace and reconciliation processes in many conflict-ridden societies and have contributed to the promotion of peace and the reduction of violence all over the world. Religious authorities and spiritual leaders such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King and Said Nursi are, for many, the embodiment of the peaceful fight against hate and discrimination.

Including religious authorities in the process of peacemaking and reconciliation can provide an extra dimension of legitimacy that secular authorities may lack. For example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in post-apartheid South Africa was led by prominent religious leaders rather than lawyers and judges.

While many areas of post-conflict reconstruction depend mainly on political will and financial resources, issues such as forgiveness and reconciliation are much more complicated. In order for a society to forgive and reconcile, there is a need to reach deeper into the sentiments of human beings and this may require tools that political structures are not necessarily equipped with. This is, perhaps one of the reasons why religious leaders have taken a prominent role in countries which have implemented post-conflict truth and reconciliation commissions.

When the UN was formed in 1945, many religious leaders insisted on a stronger voice for small nations and not only the main powers. Some years later, during the formation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the same religious leaders inspired the formulation of Article 18: *“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, workshop and*

*observance.”*

In Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s, the Catholic Church took on diverse positions regarding human rights and democracy. While some priests and bishops promoted human rights and social justice for the poor, others remained supportive of the authoritarian regimes.

In many parts of Asia, Buddhist monks have taken the lead in non-violent struggles for freedom, democracy and human rights. This was recently exemplified in Burma/Myanmar by the peaceful demonstrations conducted by monks against the authoritarian regime in 2008.

In West Africa, the tension between Christians and Muslims has grown significantly over the last ten years. However, in countries and contexts where Muslim and Christian leaders have formed inter-religious councils, they have found mechanisms to decrease tension and prevent the spread of conflict.

All over the world, women are discriminated against, both on religious as well as cultural grounds. Many religious orientations still support traditional patriarchal structures that are inherently discriminatory to women. Furthermore, religious authorities have a long history of suppressing the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community. In some countries, homosexuality is considered illegal and can result in severe penalties. Even when not prohibited by law, being open about one's sexual orientation can incur great risks of psychological and physical abuse. With increasing globalisation, the rights of women and LGBT persons have become a focal point in the debate concerning differences in cultural and religious traditions.

## *Objectives*

**The Board of the Parliamentary Forum of Small Arms and Light Weapons, meeting in Managua, Nicaragua on October 24, 2009;**

*Believes* legislation should not be founded on religious arguments but should provide religious freedom to any individual, as well as the freedom to refrain from worship if one so desires, mandating Forum members to work for an open and inclusive democracy, reflecting the will of all people irrespective of religious affiliation;

*Acknowledges* the positive role played by religious representatives and authorities in the processes of truth telling, peace and reconciliation;

*Promotes* a deeper political understanding of and interaction with religion and religious leaders to better utilise the potential of religion in peacemaking and to prevent the risk of religion fuelling conflicts and tensions;

*Recognises* the positive work carried out by inter-religious councils in areas of conflict and encourages the formation of such councils to better manage the dialogue between religious majorities and minorities;

*Supports* the UN - Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief;

*Promotes* multi-religious dialogue and cooperation between religious leaders, politicians and civil society as an important factor in creating an open and tolerant society and preventing intolerance and prejudice;

*Acknowledges* the role of information and education in creating a better understanding of the relationship between religion and politics;

*Rejects* all forms of aggressive fundamentalism, religious as well as secular, and encourages the creation of a common approach to be used by religious leaders in facing the threat stemming from intolerance and ignorance;

*Encourages* leaders from all religions to formulate a common code of conduct in times of conflict and social unrest in order to prevent religion from becoming a pretext for violence and discrimination;

*Urges* religious authorities to use their influence in promoting the rights of women as well as LGBT - persons in society and stresses that religion as a social force has both the responsibility and possibility to advocate for the human rights of all individuals regardless of gender or sexual orientation;