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**Statement by Heiner Bielefeldt
SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON FREEDOM OF
RELIGION OR BELIEF**

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Honourable Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege to have this interactive dialogue on issues relating to my mandate as Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. Almost thirty years ago, the General Assembly proclaimed the 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief and the Special Rapporteur's mandate was established five years later. During the past quarter of a century the different mandate holders have collected a wealth of experience and contributed to clarifying the content of freedom of religion or belief.¹ However, as evidenced by the cases taken up by the mandate in the reports, intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief are still prevalent in many countries. Unfortunately, the implementation of the 1981 Declaration is far from being a reality for numerous individuals and religious communities all over the world.

How can intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief be effectively tackled and, even better, prevented? Apart from the avenue of education, which I have discussed in my report to the Human Rights Council earlier this year, interreligious dialogue may be an important tool for preventing misunderstanding and discrimination. Against this background, I have focused the attention of my current thematic report to the General Assembly (A/66/156) on the role of the State in promoting interreligious communication. I use the wide term “interreligious communication” to include various forms of exchange of information, experiences and ideas of all kinds between individuals belonging to different theistic, atheistic or non-theistic beliefs or not professing any religion or belief.

Interreligious communication has an important role to play in the continuous endeavour to eliminate prejudices and stereotypes which constitute the root causes of resentment, fear, paranoia, hatred, hostility, violence and concomitant human rights abuses. Regular encounters between individuals and groups, if conducted on an equal footing and with a long-term perspective, foster a better mutual understanding across religious divides. While some participants in dialogue projects might experience certain frustrations at times, this should not discourage people from continuing these dialogue projects. In addition, it is important to appreciate the diversity of interreligious communication with regard to settings, themes, goals and modes of operation. Interreligious dialogue may manifest itself in concrete events, such as public conferences or ceremonies, as well as in long-term forums or projects. It can take

¹ For a thematic compilation of excerpts of the Special Rapporteur's reports from 1986 to 2011 see the *Rapporteur's Digest on Freedom of Religion or Belief*, available online at: www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/RapporteursDigestFreedomReligionBelief.pdf

place at a grass-roots level or on the level of religious leadership, or in a combination thereof. Communication can be formally institutionalized or evolve spontaneously.

The General Assembly has repeatedly encouraged activities that are aimed at promoting interreligious and intercultural dialogue in order to enhance social stability, respect for diversity and mutual respect in diverse communities and to create, at the global, regional, national and local levels, an environment conducive to peace and mutual understanding. During its last session, the General Assembly proclaimed the first week of February every year the “World Interfaith Harmony Week between all religions, faiths and beliefs”, and also requested the Secretary-General to further solicit views of Member States on the possibility of proclaiming a United Nations decade for interreligious and intercultural dialogue and cooperation for peace.

States have a number of possibilities to play a constructive role in promoting interreligious communication, based on respect for every human being’s freedom of religion or belief. For example, States may encourage interreligious communication by publicly expressing their appreciation for well-defined dialogue projects. States may provide financial subsidies to existing or newly created projects. States may facilitate dialogue among members of various religious or belief groups in the framework of the State itself and they can develop forums for regular encounters of people of different religious or belief affiliations. Besides promoting “formal” interreligious dialogue, I would like to emphasize that States should also become more aware of the potential of so-called “informal” interreligious communication across different groups that is not organized explicitly along denominational lines, for example through informal settings in multicultural neighbourhoods, schools, clubs and other public services. In addition, substantive and substantial participation by women in formal interreligious dialogue projects should be a priority in order to address the current imbalance in the composition of high-level interreligious dialogue events where women tend to be marginalized.

Unfortunately, State-sponsored interreligious communication, if conducted in an inappropriate manner, can have serious negative side effects. If the State is perceived to take sides in favour of one particular religion or one specific strand within the predominant religion, then other religious communities may, for perfectly understandable reasons, prefer not to participate in a State-sponsored dialogue initiative. Obviously, interreligious dialogue

projects should not lead to alienation of the very communities those projects are trying to engage. When supporting interreligious communication, the State of course remains under the obligation to always respect the inherent dignity of all human beings and their right to freedom of religion or belief.

Therefore, when promoting interreligious dialogue projects, States should take into account a number of important caveats. States should refrain from monopolizing interreligious communication; States should not identify themselves with one particular religion or belief; they should endeavour to be inclusive, in the sense that the overall balance of State-promoted interreligious dialogue projects must be fair and non-discriminatory; and States should meticulously respect the principle of voluntary participation and should refrain from negatively branding those communities that decide not to participate in an interreligious dialogue project.

Furthermore, intrareligious diversity and internal pluralism within religious or belief communities should never be undervalued. A telling metaphor frequently used to describe the general purpose of interreligious dialogue projects is the “building of bridges”. This metaphor seems to imply the possibility of clearly locating the discussant groups on two opposite sides of a river or a valley. In this context it is often said that sustainable bridge-building presupposes “solid pillars” in the sense that a clear awareness of the respective religious identities is required on both sides of the bridge. This metaphor is revealing in that it obviously presupposes a bipolar juxtaposition of “us and them”. Indeed, even dialogue projects that are designed to prevent a “clash of civilizations” sometimes operate implicitly on the basis of a global map of predefined religious and cultural groupings that are thought to be rigid and inflexible. Against such misperceptions, I would argue that we should not construe an antagonistic scenario of “us and them” living on different islands. On the contrary, we very much live on one common mainland with multifaceted layers of interconnections, identities and complexities not based solely on religion or belief. To avoid the danger of downplaying internal pluralism, a good combination of intra- and interreligious communication is advisable.

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Let me conclude by underlining how impressed I am by the high degree of commitment that countless people show in the field of interreligious communication. I hold in high esteem

those who have been engaging, often under complicated circumstances, in communicative projects designed to eliminate prejudices, stereotypes and hostility. Members of minority groups, even those who have so far been largely excluded from existing dialogue projects, have repeatedly expressed to me their hopes that interreligious communication may help to improve their situations.

I therefore encourage States to continue and further increase promotional activities in the field of interreligious communication. These activities should be conducted in a spirit of inclusiveness, non-discrimination and respect for every human being's freedom of religion or belief. Ultimately, this may also help implement the 1981 Declaration by preventing intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief.

I thank you for your attention.
