

CONCEPT NOTE
10th Anniversary Symposium on the
Role of Religion and Faith-Based Organizations in International Affairs

Human Rights and Dignity: Towards a Just, Peaceable and Inclusive Future

Tuesday, 23 January 2024
8:00 AM to 12:30 PM

Venue: Virtual (Register here)

https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_1tOAZugrSAqGdUBAMMQpUQ

Sponsoring Organizations:

ACT Alliance, General Board of Church and Society of The United Methodist Church, Islamic Relief, Religions for Peace, Seventh-Day Adventist Church, Soka Gakkai International, United Religions Initiative, World Council of Churches, UN Women, UNFPA

In partnership with:

UN Inter-agency Task Force on Religion and Development

The 2024 Annual Symposium on the Role of Religion and Faith-based Organizations in International Affairs marks a significant milestone as it celebrates its tenth anniversary. A decade ago, faith-based partners initiated this symposium, which coincided with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday and aimed at fostering dialogue on the intricate interplay between religion and international affairs. With a deliberate inclusion of UN member states and entities, the symposium sought to create a platform for collaborative policymaking and constructive engagement.

In 2016, the second symposium established a strong partnership with the UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable Development, creating an annual policy dialogue involving UN entities, member states, faith-based actors, and civil society to address pressing global challenges. Past themes have included a wide range of critical issues related to human rights, the promotion of peace, inclusion, and combating systemic injustice. The upcoming 10th Symposium will reiterate commitment to human rights and dignity. It aims to inspire collective action for a compassionate society and aligns with World Interfaith Harmony Week in February to promote understanding among diverse religious communities worldwide.

CONTEXT

The 10th Symposium is timely as the international community both takes stock of progress on existing commitments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals and looks to address the challenges of the future. In the planning for what follows the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the active role of the faith communities in society and their roles as policymakers and service providers highlight the importance of faith leaders in negotiations and output of plans for the future.

The world is radically different from when the UN was conceived, and different even from the context that shaped the 2030 Agenda. The introduction to Our Common Agenda states: “Humanity faces a stark and urgent choice: breakdown or breakthrough.” In pursuit of a collective breakthrough, there is a crucial need for faith communities to not only work toward achieving existing commitments, but also address a rapidly changing global landscape, including assertions on the rights of future generations. We face critical challenges, including the devastating impacts of climate change, the emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other technologies, setbacks in human rights standards and breakdowns in global governance, including disregard for international human rights and humanitarian laws, and protracted humanitarian crises and disasters. Environmental degradation, the rise of populism, genocide, racism and xenophobia, and growing fundamentalist extremist movements further drive conflicts, pulling the global community farther away from our collective goals.

Faith communities play a critical role in the achievement of our collective goals. We advocate for the creation of the UN Pact for the Future, in solidarity with the Global South, and recognize that fundamental issues related to global financial structures, funding mechanisms, and technology transfer must be reformed to serve as the foundation for progress.

KEY FOCUS AREAS:

1- Upholding Human Dignity: Respecting Rights, Flourishing Humanity: The core question of what it means to be human will be explored deeply. The symposium will underscore that embracing human rights must be intrinsically tied to respecting the dignity of every individual. Religious understanding regards human dignity as intrinsic and inherent to one’s humanity, and human rights norms and standards are the means to protect that dignity. Discussions will encompass the significance of dignity in personal, communal, and professional relationships and the responsibilities we have in safeguarding it.

2. Champions of Change for Gender Equality: Explore the impact of faith actors and religious institutions in promoting gender equality, women's empowerment, and challenging harmful cultural norms. Discuss successes and challenges in this area.

3. Peace and Security: Examine the role of faith actors and religious institutions in promoting peace, mediating conflicts, and fostering dialogue among different communities. Do religious institutions and religious leaders have a responsibility to address, intervene, and prevent violence against women? How do we enable human security as a critical concept intrinsic to national security?

4. Navigating the Crossroads: Assessing the Role of Faith Actors and Religious Institutions in International Affairs: Engage in a balanced discussion about potential challenges or controversies associated with the involvement of faith actors and religious institutions in international affairs, including questions of accountability, neutrality, and potential conflicts of interest. Include discussions on the local and global impacts of faith actors and religious institutions, considering how their efforts influence both their immediate communities and the broader international community.

FORMAT OF THE SYMPOSIUM

- **High-Level Welcome:**
The formal welcome session will feature a high-level representative from three entities—faith-based and IATF-nominated speakers from the UN System and UN member states. It will focus on reaffirming the importance of the symposium in general and the urgency and relevance of the current theme.
- **Session on Upholding Human Dignity: Respecting Rights, Flourishing Humanity:**
This session will serve as an introduction to where we are now and where we want to go as it relates to the United Nations and its mandates. It will address the role of faith actors and religious institutions in serving as a moral compass and guide to keeping human dignity at the core of human rights.
- **Session on Gender Equality, Peace, and Eradicating Violence:**
This session will serve as a space for understanding the interlinkages between the state of violence and conflict, its impact on gender equality, and how we can build a more just and peaceful world.
- **Session on Key Learnings for a Just, Peaceable and Inclusive Future:**
This session serves as the learning and hearing section of the symposium on practical experiences from different levels—grassroots, national, regional, and multiregional/international. This session also contributes to the Summit of the Future and an elaboration of the UN Pact for the Future.

- **Concluding Session:**

This concluding session will feature two key speakers—one from the faith-based group and another from the UN system—who will provide key ideas about what needs to be done next. This session is envisioned to impart a strong call for collaboration and partnership on the key learnings from the symposium.

PARTICIPATION

Invitations will be sent to various constituencies and networks of the collaborating symposium partners. This includes FBOs, civil society organizations, member states and their permanent missions, and UN agencies through the Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable Development. Registration to participate online is open to all to join interactively. The symposium will be broadcast live via YouTube for general public viewing.

DOCUMENTATION

Following the tradition of previous symposiums, a symposium packet will be produced electronically and distributed in advance. It will include this concept note, a short bibliography of reference materials to prepare participants for discussion, and a list of biographies of panel moderators and speakers. A weblink to the event will contain the symposium packet as well as post-event documentation of presentations and statements. As a hybrid event, various social media platforms will be used to simulcast and broadcast the symposium.

READINGS

- **U.N. Resources**

[Our Common Agenda Report](#)

[Summit of the Future](#) (22-23 September 2024)

[Summary of the Policy Briefs](#)

Policy Briefs:

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| 1. Future Generations | 7. International Financial Architecture |
| 2. Emergency Platform | 8. Outer Space |
| 3. Youth Engagement | 9. New Agenda for Peace |
| 4. Beyond Gross Domestic Product | 10. Transforming Education |
| 5. Global Digital Compact | 11. United Nations 2.0 |
| 6. Information Integrity | |

- **Religious, Ecumenical and Interfaith Resources**

[Symposium History](#)

[Summary of the Symposium History](#)