

ECRL Moscow Declaration on Advancing Human Dignity – through human rights and traditional values

We, the European Council of Religious Leaders, meeting in Moscow in June 2011, express our warm thanks and appreciation to the Russian Orthodox Church and to His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, for their generous welcome and hospitality.

This declaration made at our first meeting in Russia, is in continuity with previous declarations of the European Council of Religious Leaders. It continues our work to further interreligious dialogue and a culture of peace and tolerance in the confident hope that this will deepen and extend the contribution of the religious communities of Europe to the spiritual and material wellbeing of the people of Europe and the world in these times of change and challenge.

As religious leaders in Europe we are deeply concerned about the many and serious violations of human dignity and human rights in Europe and across the world. Because we are conscious of past violence in the history of Europe, we have all too clearly in mind the atrocities of genocides, wars and terrorism which have marred recent decades. In addressing these matters, we have explored in this declaration our understanding of the important relationships between the sources of human dignity, human rights and traditional values. Our deliberations have taken account of the significant discussions of recent years between ourselves and in other fora including in the United Nations Human Rights Council. By traditional values we refer to those values which are widely held in religions and cultures and which have been foundational in providing moral bases for societies.

This declaration seeks to identify the common ethical ground which we share. This does not thereby deny the distinctive perspectives of our respective faiths about God and the Divine, the nature of persons and the relationship between them.

We recognise that our approach as religious leaders, accountable to our understandings of the Divine and based on conscience and our traditions, can give rise to certain misgivings and even rejections amongst those whose perspective is different from ours. However, we believe that our contribution to the fullest acceptance of human rights is to insist that a complete understanding of the human person and of their dignity must be rooted deeply in the ultimate sources of all authority. We believe that our approach to human dignity should be an integral part of the work against injustice and violence.

As representatives of religious communities in Europe, we believe that genuine human freedom is expressed in the commitment to choose the truth and justice which comes from above and it is this which secures the foundational dignity of human beings.

To this end and as a further contribution we make the following declaration:

- 1) The dignity of the human person is at the core of all our religious traditions. Every individual human being is bestowed with such dignity which should be respected regardless of the person's religious or moral status or any other quality, even when it is tarnished for example, by crime or inhuman and immoral behaviours. For religions, human dignity is derived directly from the relationship

between the Divine or ultimate reality and human beings, and it defines appropriate relationships between human beings in this world. From human dignity follow fundamental freedoms and rights as well as moral obligations. Within various religious traditions respect for human dignity is expressed in teachings on responsibility, virtue and love for neighbour.

- 2) It is in the nature of religious traditions to recognise the Divine as the ultimate source of authority. This leaves any decision or agreement reached by human beings open to discussion. This attitude supports the core freedoms expressed in human rights and sets us free to question all forms of tyranny and absolutism.
- 3) The fundamental freedom which follows from human dignity is a freedom to choose good over evil and thus to work for the realisation of this freedom for all. It follows from this that we are committed *inter alia* to the right to life and freedom of expression, to freedom of religion, to freedom from oppression, freedom from torture and other inhuman or degrading treatment, freedom from hunger and freedom from any act that undermines our dignity as human beings.
- 4) In all religious traditions human dignity also gives rise to the believers' responsibilities to the Divine and to other human beings and forms the ground for freedom and responsibility. Although fundamentally free, every human being is included within relationships of mutual dependence in which the actions of the individual impact on others. This applies at all levels of society, from relationships in the family to obligations on the national level and to global solidarity. In our time responsibility for the natural environment and for future generations has become one of our major concerns.
- 5) The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) is an expression of shared values which are recognised across religions and cultures, and which we as leaders of diverse religious traditions emphatically support. This formalising of human rights was the result of long processes and against the background of terrible examples of the breakdown of respect for human dignity. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, together with the legally binding Human Rights instruments which have followed in its wake, has contributed greatly to the furthering of human dignity in recent decades. The European Convention on Human Rights and its Court have provided a particular focus for the promotion of human rights in Europe.
- 6) Our understanding of human rights is rooted in our understanding of human dignity and incorporates many of our core religious values. We therefore consider human rights not to be a new value system but rather a formalised expression of some traditional moral values that is binding on states and formed and supported by diverse religious and traditional value systems
- 7) Traditional values are often deeply rooted and in practice may have greater authority in a society than positive law. They can enhance human dignity and dignified human life and are to be distinguished from those traditional practices which harm human dignity and are often in contrast to genuine religious values and principles. However, general recognition of the importance of some traditional

values should not imply the acceptance of all, since they vary both within and across cultures.

- 8) In our previous declarations, *The Berlin Declaration on Interreligious Dialogue* (2008), *The Lille Declaration on a Culture of Peace* (2009), and *The Istanbul Declaration on Tolerance* (2010) we have affirmed our commitment to tolerance and to respect for human rights and their corresponding traditional religious values, articles of faith and symbols. As religious leaders we benefit from dialogue across religious and cultural boundaries, not least within Religions for Peace and the European Council of Religious Leaders. The expression of values is not static and we greatly value the cross fertilisation, mutual questioning and responsibility which dialogue facilitates.
- 9) Based on the understanding that furthering of human dignity is at the core of all our religious traditions, we see potential for more active cooperation between religious communities and political authorities in the promotion of human dignity and the implementation of human rights.

Building on these principles and convictions, we, as leaders of Europe's diverse religions, pledge:

- To work individually and together and with all people of good will to ensure that human rights recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention and subsequent agreements and their corresponding responsibilities, are realised and thus secure for all human beings their freedom and dignity which find their roots in the Divine.
- To work to overcome perceived and actual oppositions between human rights and traditional and religious values and to speak against both the misuse of the language of traditional values for example to protect established power structures and also the misuse of the language of human rights to promote agendas that are inconsistent with human dignity.
- To work with political authorities and non governmental organisations to explore in greater depth how traditional values and human rights interact, how they support and influence each other and how specific expressions of human rights may conflict with specific traditional moral values.
- To examine critically our own practices in order to identify and counter within our own religious communities that which does not further the human dignity to which we are committed. As a result, we will especially work to further respect for human rights.

- To strengthen our engagement in interreligious dialogue in order to share insights and experiences and benefit from the critical and honest openness which characterises all genuine dialogue. We will take special care to strengthen the involvement of women and young people in our dialogue and to ensure they have a proper place and voice in our communities.
- To speak publicly about the freedoms and responsibilities that follow from human dignity.. We will ensure that we continue to take special care to include in our communities and to ensure a voice for, groups that are often marginalised, for example the poor, migrants and those living with or affected by HIV/aids.

At our Council meeting in Moscow we have again been inspired by our shared commitment to human flourishing and the quality of human life through the fullest acceptance of the dignity of every human being. We have pledged to extend our collaboration with each other and with other organisations committed to these ends. The visible sign to the world of our commitment to these pledges will be the extent to which they are realised in our communities and in our society.