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REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL ON THE EXECUTION OF THE PROGRAMME ADOPTED BY THE GENERAL CONFERENCE

Dialogue among endogenous religions, Christianity and Islam in the service of the culture of peace in Africa

SUMMARY

At its third meeting in Tripoli on 7 and 8 May 2005, the UNESCO Committee for NEPAD recommended that the Director-General organize a conference on establishing a dialogue between endogenous African religions, Islam and Christianity, with a view to proposing actions conducive to ensuring harmony, peace and tolerance in the continent.

As part of the implementation of that decision, the Director-General of UNESCO organized an international symposium on “**Dialogue among endogenous religions, Christianity and Islam in the service of the culture of peace in Africa**” in Cotonou, Benin, on 20 and 21 August 2007, with the support of the World Islamic Call Society (WICS) and the Government of Benin.

This document contains the final declaration of that symposium.

1. The International Symposium on “Dialogue among endogenous religions, Christianity and Islam in the service of the culture of peace in Africa” was held in Cotonou, Benin, on 20 and 21 August 2007, on the initiative of the Director-General of UNESCO and with the support of the World Islamic Call Society (WICS) and the Government of Benin.

2. The participants in the meeting adopted the following declaration, to be known as the Cotonou Declaration:

“**WE**, the participants in the International Symposium on Dialogue among Endogenous Religions, Christianity and Islam in the Service of the Culture of Peace in Africa, meeting in Cotonou on 20 and 21 August 2007,

Touched by the messages from the representative of the Head of State of Benin, Ms Christine Ouinsavi, Minister of Primary Education, Literacy and National Languages, and President of the Benin National Commission for UNESCO, from the representative of the Director-General of UNESCO, Mr Nouréini Tidjani-Serpos, from the representative of the Secretary-General of the World Islamic Call Society (WICS), Dr Amara Beet El Afia, from Cardinal Bernardin Gantin, Dean Emeritus of the College of Cardinals, the Vatican, from El Hadj Girigissou Gado, Secretary-General of the Islamic Union of Benin, from the Archbishop of Cotonou, Monsignor Marcel Honorat Agboton, from Dagbo-Hounon, the Supreme Chief of Vodun, and from Vizir Akande Olofindji, President of the international institute “Africa-Cultures”,

Reassured by the active participation of researchers, experts, theologians, representatives of civil society organizations, eminent spiritual and temporal leaders, media professionals, artists and writers from Africa and the rest of the world,

Convinced that the concept of dialogue entails a considerable intellectual and emotional investment involving a peaceful confrontation between two or more forms of rationality with a view to opening up a new avenue which is conducive to recognizing the Other as an interlocutor with the same rights as oneself,

Aware of the fact that interfaith dialogue is an effective tool for combating ignorance, promoting respect for tolerance, and preserving values which further cultural diversity and the eminent dignity of each human being,

Desirous of promoting an education system which is open to synergies and the new challenges of our time, and which rejects various types of identity retrenchment which give rise to tensions within and between religions,

Concerned to bring together political decision-makers, religious leaders, NGOs, women and young people around innovative interreligious strategies which promote dialogue at the local, national and international levels,

Recalling:

The Declaration of Principles on Tolerance adopted by the General Conference in November 1995;

The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity adopted by the General Conference in November 2001;

The Declaration of Libreville on Intercultural Dialogue and the Culture of Peace in Central Africa and the Great Lakes Region of December 2003;

The Abuja Statement on the Dialogue among Civilizations, Religions and Cultures in West Africa;

The Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in October 2005;

The Rabat Commitment: conclusions and recommendations of the Rabat Conference on Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations through Concrete and Sustained Initiatives of June 2005;

The Abuja Declaration of June 2006 on the Dialogue among Civilizations, Cultures and Peoples: The Pivotal Role of Education and Science,

DO SOLEMNLY DECLARE:

1. that the African continent may experience sustainable development as part of its struggle to eliminate poverty only if peace reigns within a framework of social harmony and sharing based on the principles of freedom, justice, democracy, tolerance, solidarity, and a culture which respects human rights, rejects violence, endeavours to avert conflicts at source and to solve problems through dialogue, preventive diplomacy and negotiation;
2. that such a regional space which is open to pluralism is conducive to the recognition of the growing role played by religions in the strengthening of ethical values and social cohesion;
3. that in interreligious dialogue in Africa, the leaders of the various religious denominations and spiritual traditions have a great responsibility in the fight against intolerance, which demands that they incorporate a knowledge of other religions in the training of future priests, pastors, imams, preachers, theologians and endogenous religious leaders and their faithful;
4. that encouragement should be given in each African country to the establishment, on the initiative of the various religious confessions, of a national council with a view to providing a framework for exchange, information, encounters and the formulation of principles which should guide interreligious dialogue; in this connection, we salute the establishment, on 25 May 2007, of a framework for interfaith consultation and coordination in Benin;
5. that religious education should play a key role in the promotion of interfaith dialogue; in this perspective, school and university curricula should incorporate the teaching of cultural diversity, interreligious dialogue, the principles of tolerance and the recognition of differences as a source of richness;
6. that a policy of quality education for all should be pursued vigorously in Africa in order to attain the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in this field and enable Africans to push back the frontiers of ignorance by means of a sounder mastery of science, technology and scientific research in the fields of the human and social sciences;
7. that the various community-based modes and structures of knowledge transmission found on African soil should be taken into account in education development policies and strategies, with a view to ensuring the equity and synergy of education systems, and with the aim of strengthening the role of education in the popularization of the culture of peace through the use of national languages;
8. that UNESCO should encourage African States to ratify and implement the international instruments relating to the flow and dissemination of cultural goods, in particular books, thereby helping to remove the numerous obstacles to the promotion of books and reading, which are vital instruments for interreligious dialogue;
9. that UNESCO should help to establish in African States UNESCO Chairs on interfaith studies, linked together through networks of centres of excellence;
10. that all precautions concerning professional standards should be taken by professional journalists themselves to ensure that the organs of the press do not become media of hatred and intolerance, but rather function as powerful forces for and instruments of the promotion of tolerance, social justice, reconciliation and the culture of peace;
11. that the decision of the United Nations to celebrate **World Day for Cultural Diversity and for Dialogue and Development on 21 May** should be implemented in all African States in order to reactivate awareness-building among stakeholders in interfaith dialogue;
12. that the concerns relating to the intercultural and interreligious dialogue of the African Diaspora resulting from the slave trade and/or contemporary emigration should be

acknowledged, in accordance with the Constitutive Act of the African Union, which recognizes the Diaspora as the sixth region of Africa.”

Adopted unanimously on 21 August 2007 in Cotonou.