

RELIGIOUS CULTURAL HERITAGE, HUMAN DIGNITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Description: Religious cultural heritage is emerging as a new engagement point for reaching the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This adds an important dimension to ongoing work on protecting sacred sites. New thinking points to ways that protecting and cultivating religious cultural heritage can advance many SDGs. Sacred sites serve as a meeting point for development of dialogical civic spaces and as an area for exchange in the religious and cultural spheres. At the same time, work in this area has become more complex because shared and contested sites have been weaponised as focal points of acts of religious or ethnic hatred and of state-sponsored geopolitical agendas. This raises a number of challenges of how to manage complex custodianship relationships of religious associations and heritage authorities without infringing upon religious autonomy and freedom of religion or belief on the one hand, and wider civic and cultural expectations on the other. This session builds on the important work and leadership of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and other stakeholders to suggest important ways that the safeguarding of sacred sites and religious cultural heritage can help further broader initiatives to advance sustainable development goals. Moderated by Prof. Peter Petkoff (Director of the Religion, Law and International Relations Programme, Centre for Religion and Culture at Regent's Park College, University of Oxford, United Kingdom), speakers were H.R.H. Amb. Princess Haifa al-Mograin (Permanent Delegate of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; Chair of the G20 Development Working Group), Msgr. David-Maria A. Jaeger OFM (Prelate Auditor of the Court of the Roman Rota), Ms. Ana Jimenez (Political Advisor at United Nations Alliance of Civilizations), Prof. Paul Morris (UNESCO Chair in Interreligious Understanding and Relations at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand), Dr. Tugba Tanyeri-Erdemir (Non-Resident Research Associate at Department of Anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh, USA), and Dr. Michael Winer (Human Rights Officer at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights).

Presentations Overview:

Prof. Peter Petkoff introduced the topics emphasizing that there are no international legislations that deal specifically with religious cultural heritage. They exist in multiple settings. Issues surrounding this topic involve human rights, rights to private property, the legacy of colonization, and environmental protection. The topic also connects with multiple Sustainable Development Goals. He asked panelists to speak to how the preservation of religious cultural heritage contributes to the building of dialogical and inclusive civic spaces and relate that to the wider achievement of the SDGs. Panelists were asked to address the role museums play in being aware of religious significance and creating safe dialogical space. He spoke about recent changes with Hagia Sophia under the leadership of Erdogan.²³ Although there has always been a small mosque open on the site, what is the role of the State in making an executive decision that steers a heritage in one direction or another? This issue has importance beyond religion. How can we imagine religious sites as sites for cultural meetings and sites for peace-making and dialogue? How do we connect cultural heritage and religious cultural heritage? Can this be built into Action Plans for achieving the SDGs? How do we make holistic civic spaces that foster inclusive growth and environmental protection? There are emerging new practices that look at sites in terms of both religious and non-religious practices. UNESCO is now considering how sites are

²³ For more information, see <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/10/europe/hagia-sophia-mosque-turkey-intl/index.html>.

used for religious and cultural practices. Historically, they had stayed away from religion. This topic also has implications for Indigenous religious cultural groups and their rights. Religious leaders have become more savvy as they participate in drafting legislation. They begin to better understand international mechanisms and international systems.

H.R.H. Amb. Princess Haifa al-Mograin talked about a great linkage that exists between cultural heritage and religion. One out of five UNESCO sites has religious significance. What is at issue is the involvement of State Parties and international heritage. Preservation of the sites and properties allows for the integration of several SDGs. For example, SDG 11 emphasizes making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. The topic also connects to SDG 16 which emphasizes peace, justice and strong institutions and the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development. The responsibility for preserving heritage sites often lies within the states. The role is to be engaged, asking how we can integrate heritage preservation into future development conversations. Let's look forward as we address issues and look for ways to improve how this is done. Let's address multiple dimensions, and intangible as well as tangible aspects as we work together to protect and promote cultural heritage. This provides a great role for States. This could be a platform for an international convention to preserve and protect religious heritage. NGOs have a role to play in educating and informing people as do social media outlets. Media partners might explore, in relation to SDG Goal 17 *Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development*, how to mitigate the use of hate speech. In Saudi Arabia, there is a centre for combatting extreme ideologies. Human rights are fundamental to achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Religious leaders can play several roles. They play a role as 'rights holders,' they create safe spaces to exchange ideas, they look to establishing right legal rights, they help remove stereotypes, and they are capacity builders. Political will is needed in this process.

Prof. Paul Morris emphasized that the protection of religious sites has particular implications for Indigenous peoples. The protection of sites are tangible linkages, but religious, culture and spirituality expressions are intangible. Religious rituals express the spirituality of people who have ties to the sites. The notion of religious heritage has an important dimension that is connected to a broader international agenda. There is an increasing appreciation for the notion of religious heritage (including among minority communities). Protection of heritage sites involves internal State dialogue and between-States dialogue with interfaith components. Religion is embedded within individuals. Religious heritage is integrated into a number of SDG goals. Protection of religious sites is significantly connected to religious expressions. Sites also remind people of historical experiences. An important relationship in heritage protection is management of the intangibles. If poorly managed, the antithesis emerges: conflict. Peace requires an understanding of a broader religious cultural heritage. This perspective requires a post-colonial reflection on the broader context of religious heritage protection. For example, climate change has led to the disappearance of important minority cultures and peoples. Prior to the events in New Zealand at Christ Church, there had been a dismissal of securitization of religious sites. Now there is a recognition that places of worship might not be safe sites. The revised *Plan of Action* is an exciting development that has support at the highest levels.²⁴ New Zealand recently passed new hate speech legislation and they have been doing more extensive mapping of religious sites. Religious diversity is a fact in New Zealand. It is important that the stakeholder approach create spaces for religious voices that goes beyond just religious leaders. The evolving

²⁴ For more information, see <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/revised-action-plan-to-improve-security-of-peacekeepers>.

plan promises grassroots involvement. This certainly brings religious cultural heritage into the SDG process. He did express a slight concern about only adopting a human rights perspective as if it were the only approach taken by stakeholders. He prefers a cosmopolitan perspective that supports an internationalist framework and helps mobilize transnational organizations. International human rights calls for a broader cosmopolitan perspective so that we can internationalize our concerns.

Dr. Tugba Tanyeri-Erdemir emphasized that there are multiple dimensions to the protection of religious and cultural heritage sites. One approach could be referred to as ‘Museumification’ where preservation is narrowly construed to mean “preservation” of religious cultural heritage. A negative example of what *not* to do is Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, Turkey. It is an ancient Orthodox structure, built in Byzantine times. After the conquest of Constantinople, it became a mosque. With museumification, Hagia Sophia became a site of co-existence. Under Erdogan, Hagia Sophia reverted back to being a mosque. The conversion was made with a “conquest” narrative. This is problematic. In this case, the State has been a dominating force, managing Hagia Sophia as a symbol of conquest. When people visit, how are they to identify with the structure: as conquered or as conquerors? This management paradigm contradicts the ethics of living together. Good management comes through peacebuilding with intentional efforts intended to bring reconciliation. There are numerous ways to work with heritage sites. The current framework of ‘preservation’ is based on the notion of Nation States. Hagia Sophia is an example where only one Nation State made the decision, but visitors come from many Nation States to visit. We need to think creatively about the importance of religious heritage. There are two additional examples of restoration from Turkey. The first is in Eastern Turkey in 2010. The site has been beautifully preserved. It operates as a museum. One day per year, Armenians can use it for religious ceremonies. The second example is in Western Turkey. In this case, restoration of the site was done with the involvement of the Armenian community. Restoration acknowledged their hardships. Turks, Kurds, and Armenians were provided with opportunities to share their experiences with one another. Some things to think about include going beyond the nation state as the sole decision maker and consider, what is the site’s meaning to various communities?

Msgr. David-Maria A. Jaeger OFM emphasized that the first narrative that should override all other narratives is that the place is a sacred site. He also emphasized that sacred sites are valuable. The protections requested by religious groups for religious sites must remain. These are rights of private property. Sacred sites are the property of religious groups, not the state. The sites are first and foremost sacred. When sites are opened to visitors, they are there on sufferance, by permission of the religious group. For example, Christ Church Meadow in Oxford, England. Religious leaders have the right to shut down sites. It is their site. He talked about the exercise of soft power in international relations when developing international law. When developing conventions, private property rights should be prioritized. The protection of sites can be made more effective by improving monitoring, making violations known, holding state accountable by influencing their public reputations. Conventions will be ineffective if they are not monitored and enforced.

Dr. Michael Winer discussed how religious cultural heritage links to the Sustainable Development Goals. Religious cultural heritage has three direct entry points: Goal 16.1 *Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere*; Goal 11.4 *Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage*; and Goal 10.2. *By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all,*

irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status. It is important that we try not to conceive of things in silos. We need to note the interdependencies involved with a variety of issues. Peacebuilding is paramount in the process. The Special Rapporteur in Cypress recommends the ongoing inclusion of religious cultural sites in building peace. The Cypress Peace Talks resulted in opening, cleaning and maintaining places of worship. President Nicos Anastasiades of Cyprus has indicated that he is ready to resume talks.²⁵ Michael also expressed excitement over the recent *Plan of Action* revision. The United Nations has worked with the Alliance of Civilizations on hate speech and protection of religious sites. He emphasized the importance of inclusive education, peer-to-peer education, and storytelling. There should be no silos at the United Nations. Stakeholders can be engaged via UN treaties, special procedures, and special rapporteurs. There are four pillars for engagement: construction and ownership of religious sites, accessing and use of religious sites, protection of religious sites from attacks, and preservation of religious sites. States need to be recognized as formal actors. However, human rights obligations must also apply to non-state actors. For example, the Taliban was destroying Buddhist sites.

Ms. Ana Jimenez discussed how the UN Alliance of Civilizations can work towards having places of worship become sites for achieving *SDG 4 Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*; *SDG 10 Reduce inequality within and among countries*; and *SDG 11 Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable*. It is very important that we not work in silos. Education plays an important role in all of this. Stakeholders have interlocking interests. Stakeholders should be involved in the consultation process. Different stakeholders will have well defined specific ideas, so bring them together in a consultation process. When asked how the *Plan of Action* recently evolved in ways that were driven by security issues, she indicated that it evolved because of terrorist attacks. The *Plan of Action* is inclusive and extensive. It had inclusion of consultation with stakeholders, emphasizing dialogue and understanding with a specific focus. Prevention, preparedness and response are emphasized. A broader approach emphasizing education, dialogue and online hate speech has been incorporated. The focus is on how religious leaders can build safe spaces for dialogue and learning. The global communications campaign helps people feel connection to religious sites. There is a universality to religious sites. We need to work with stakeholders to avoid a silo approach.

²⁵ For more on resuming the peace talks, see <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/09/1073512>.