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## **Dialogue vital tool to foster understanding among different faiths – UN expert**



Special Rapporteur on the freedom of religion or belief Heiner Bielefeldt

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An independent United Nations human rights expert today stressed the vital role of inter-religious communication to combat intolerance and discrimination and to promote understanding among people of different faiths.

“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,” Heiner Bielefeldt, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, told the General Assembly body that addresses social, cultural and humanitarian issues, also known as the Third Committee.

He told delegates that inter-religious communication has an important role to play in efforts to eliminate prejudices and stereotypes that lead to resentment, fear, paranoia, hatred, hostility, violence and human rights abuses.

Dialogue between different groups can take the form of concrete events such as public conferences or ceremonies, as well as long-term forums or projects, noted the expert. It can take place at a grass-roots level or at the level of religious leadership, or a combination of both. Communication can be formally institutionalized or evolve spontaneously.

Speaking to reporters after his presentation to the committee, Mr. Bielefeldt noted that certain conditions have to be met for communication to be productive.

In addition to being conducted on an equal footing and with a long-term perspective, communication should go beyond “brief, superficial handshakes,” as well as identify common interests and lead to cooperation on concrete projects, he said.

“The State has a responsibility,” he added, highlighting its role in promoting inter-religious communication, based on respect for every human being’s freedom of religion or belief.

As he pointed out to the committee, States can encourage inter-religious communication by publicly expressing their appreciation for well-defined dialogue projects, and also provide financial subsidies to such projects.

He also stressed the need for the participation of women in formal inter-religious dialogue projects, and warned against having projects in which “big, bearded males” are the only ones reaching out.

Mr. Bielefeldt, a German national with wide experience in the field of human rights, has served as Special Rapporteur since 2010. He reports in an independent and unpaid capacity to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

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