



UNIVERSAL CODE OF CONDUCT ON HOLY SITES

Holy sites are of great significance to billions of people across the globe providing spiritual meaning to those who identify with them. Yet history repeatedly demonstrates how easy it is for sacred places to become inextricably caught up in political, territorial and religious tensions, becoming themselves pawns of conflicts. There is a crucial need for an implementable system that can protect sacred sites and provide for their safe use by religious adherents worldwide. Moreover religious leaders have a crucial role and responsibility in ensuring that this takes place.

In 2009, representatives of four non-profit organizations, Search for Common Ground, the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights, One World in Dialogue, and Religions for Peace, created a working group to develop a Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites. In consultation with senior religious leaders from over ten faiths, the Universal Code was finalized in January 2011. While not a legal document, the Universal Code offers practical guidelines for safeguarding holy sites and for promoting peace and reconciliation between people from different ethnic and religious communities. It includes clauses relating to definitions, access, preservation, sharing, expropriation and education, calls for cooperation among relevant authorities, and encourages the setting up of monitoring mechanisms for the safe protection of holy places.

The Universal Code, available in 13 languages, has been endorsed by interfaith networks, religious communities and leaders world-wide among them: Religions for Peace World Council, the World Sikh Leadership, President of the All India Imam Organization, World Council of Churches and the Russian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate.

A two-year pilot project in Bosnia Herzegovina, under the auspices of its Interreligious Council, was implemented to test the efficacy of the Universal Code. The pilot's success is reflected in a newly created systematic reporting and recording of desecrations, joint visits of religious leaders to sites, multi-religious condemnation followed by repairs to the site and the active engagement of multi-stakeholders including police, media and municipality leaders. A second two-year pilot has successfully unified conflicting North American indigenous tribes who utilized the Code for peace-building purposes and adapted it to their specific needs.

In addition a pilot has begun in the Holy Land in partnership with the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land and the Council of Religious Leaders in Israel. It includes research, monitoring and educational activities to promote the protection of holy sites as well as joint actions by religious leaders and the building of cooperation between relevant bodies. Further pilots in Nigeria, Indonesia and India are due to begin in 2014. We encourage the establishment of more pilot projects in different contexts around the world to test the practical value of the Universal Code.

We are also working towards the development of a U.N. resolution on Holy Sites in the spirit of the Universal Code. Political acceptance for such a code with accompanying support for interreligious cooperation regarding the greater protection of holy sites is likely to diminish the negative role of religion in times of conflict.