

Rev. Sławomir NOWOSAD

THE RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD BEFORE CAIRO¹

Long before it started, the UN conference on population and development stirred interest, provoked discussion and criticism of some of its underlying presuppositions and proposed solutions to demographic problems on the global scale. After many months of work the Preparatory Committee published *A Project of the Final Document – Programme of Action* of 24 January 1994. The Preparatory Committee continued its work, which is why a few alterations were later introduced into the original text. These alterations, however, did not introduce any essential change.

Among the principal objections to the project of the Cairo document, its peculiar "lack of religiousness" comes to the fore. While discussing the demographic questions of the contemporary world and pointing to the ways of solving current problems, the document completely omits the fact that religion and faith are part of the life of both individuals and of whole societies. On the one hand, population policy fails to notice the necessity of respecting religious values, traditions and religious customs, and differences between particular religious traditions, as well as the place which religion occupies in man's life in general. On the other hand, the document failed to benefit from the potential of human religiousness as

a resource for solving the demographic problems. The latter does have a fundamental significance for all the peoples of the world. In opening man to the supernatural, religion confers a new dimension to the demographic questions and is a considerable support where it is morally admissible to influence the lives of particular people or of whole nations.

It is exactly this circumstance which has created the need to organize a meeting of the representatives of the greatest religions of the world, to criticize and, as it were, "supplement" the project of the UN document. The American Park Ridge Center for the Study of Health, Faith and Ethics in Chicago prepared such an international and interfaith consultation for the 4-7 May 1994, in Genval, Belgium. The consultation was held under the motto: "The Religions of the World and the 1994 Conference of the United Nations on Population and Development." One must add that meetings of a similar character, though on a smaller scale, took place earlier in the USA.²

The consultation held in Belgium gathered around thirty representatives from the greatest religious traditions of the contemporary world. There were

¹ A report from the international symposium entitled *The Religions of the World and the 1994 Conference of the United Nations on Population and Development*, Genval, Belgium, 4-7 May 1994.

² Cf. e.g. *Religious Perspectives on Population, Consumption and Environment. A Report of an Interfaith and Interdisciplinary Forum, 11-13.2.1994; Roundtable on Ethics, Population and Reproductive Health. Declaration of Ethical Principles*, New York City, 8-10.3.1994.

among them Christians (Catholics from Peru, Columbia, USA and Poland, Protestants from the Republic of South Africa, Canada, Brazil, Zaire and Germany), a Jewish woman (from France), Muslims (from Egypt, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India), Hindus (from India and the USA), a Buddhist (from Thailand), a Confucian (from China), a Shintoist (from Japan), and representatives of traditional African religions (from Ghana). They were not official representatives delegated by the superiors of particular religions, yet they all were entrusted with the task of presenting and explaining the official stance of their own religion towards the problem under discussion. Some admitted having ideas differing from official teaching. There took part in the consultation the representatives of the United Nations Population Fund, The Park Ridge Center, the Ford Foundation and Pew Global Stewardship Initiative, which sponsored the endeavour. Among the Catholics, there were lay persons and two clergymen (apart from the author of the present paper, a Jesuit from Columbia).

Four-day debates concentrated around the main questions of the project of the Cairo document. The fact that believers joined the discussion on the contemporary questions of demography stems from the conviction that such realities as population and development are also essentially rooted in religion. The believer feels obliged to present the religious perspective of the demographic questions. It is important here to understand the values and the role which each man plays as a person created by God and in the image of God. As a work of God, man should never be treated as an object or instrument. This is important at the close of the twentieth century, when in some countries there are repressive methods to hold down the birth-rate, methods which

are opposed to the dignity of man (India, China, or even Brazil, where in some regions 75% of women undergo sterilization).

The participants of the Belgium consultation unanimously stressed that any international debate concerning social policy should take into account the importance of religion and the role of religious fellowships in society (in the nation). Such basic human rights as the freedom of religion and conscience must be guaranteed. The governments and other organizations responsible for population policy cannot enforce the realization of their programmes against the will of a particular people. On the other hand, religious communities should be prudent and sensitive, since they are free to lead their faithful according to the tenets of their faith and morality. They should be open to fair criticism, if it should happen that some of their views or practices infringe upon fundamental values, such as the sanctity of life and human dignity.

An exchange of opinions among people coming from different cultural and religious circles of the world allowed us to state that one can speak about a population development crisis in our world. All participants noted that this problem was very complex, the interrelations among its various elements many-sided, and that is difficult to formulate one solution which all could accept. Undoubtedly, there must be cooperation between all international communities, in which one would listen to and take into account the input of small and poor nations as well. The members of the African countries pinpointed that the conception of development alone demanded a detailed definition of its contents. These countries usually associate it with the period of colonial exploitation, hence it ceases to bear a positive character, carrying rather

quite the opposite. One of them underlined that for them, this exploitation has not ended at all. Therefore, in speaking about development, one should take a firm stance against any forms in which the poor are exploited by the rich. One should stress firmly a profound respect for justice and equality, sensitivity to local culture, and a broad understanding of human nature and its needs.

All religions emphasize a necessity to put more value on human labour and on a fair access to the means and fruits of development. The present state of distributing natural resources and produced goods is tainted by an unjust disproportion, which is particularly visible between the rich North and the poor South of our planet. This should mobilize to a radical change in this state of affairs. The inhabitants of the developing countries in particular appealed for this mobilization. Every religion turns its attention especially to people in need, and calls for openness and sensitivity towards them. Here we find a special point of cooperation between various religions, societies and lay organizations, in order to help people living in countries at war, the poor, the homeless, immigrants, etc.

An important question arises in this context. It is a question about the world of nature and the whole natural environment, which is the environment of man's life. A religious outlook on nature recognizes in it the work of the Creator and perceives it as Holy. The majority of sacred texts within particular religious traditions perceives in nature an inherent value. Therefore, not only man, as a unique creature, is holy. Nature is holy too. Man should discover in this his task as responsible governor and warden of the whole of creation and its riches. One should also spurn that attitude to the

world of nature which leads to its inordinate and unjust exploitation.

Much time in daily discussions of demographic questions was devoted to the woman, her role and rights in contemporary society. Some participants of the consultation put such a strong stress on this that at times it was almost impossible to address other questions, for instance, the problems of the family. This feministic bent characterized primarily, though not exclusively, the majority of women – both Christians, Muslims and Hindus alike. One has to admit that in some regions of the world, women have in the past, and in the present as well, been treated unfairly in their private and social lives. Accordingly, it is important to stress that they are equal to men in dignity, and should have the same rights which are accorded to men.

However, some disputants seemed to tip the scale the other way, and conceived the question of women's rights in a manner which could not be reconciled with the principle of equal dignity for all. Such an understanding of women's rights includes also the right to abortion and grants a woman the exclusive right of decision in the matter. The author of the present text was not of the general opinion on that matter, and demanded that the right of the non-born child to life be taken into consideration. The sweeping majority of disputants did not accept the principle of the sanctity of life from conception, and argued for the availability of abortion to a greater or lesser extent. The arguments which were put forward referred, for instance, to the importance of the health of mother and child now and in the future, possible threats to the mother's life, and respect of women's rights to act fully as a moral subject (!). Such arguments, among others, argue for abortion in many contemporary religions

and justify it in chosen circumstances. Apart from the Catholic teaching, some Muslim traditions decidedly reject abortion (the majority of Islamic traditions allow it within 120 days from conception).

One could notice a related standpoint, characteristic of the individualistic philosophy. It was clearly manifested during the debate on the question of sex education and the question of contraception. For the majority of participants, the project of the Cairo document was worthy of support in its proposal of general access to contraception. The author of the present paper was of the opposite opinion. While perceiving especially among affluent societies the attitudes of liberalism and moral permissiveness, some disputants, instead of seeking to change such behaviours, rather supported various theses of the Cairo text, which condones the dissemination of sex education in the form of instruction in so-called "safe" sexual activity. Catholic instruction, based on a defined anthropological vision, discovers the true and full sense of human sexuality in the context of love, marriage and family. It seems, however, that though other religions in the majority officially call, for instance, for the preservation of sexual continence before marriage, the majority of disputants in Genval practically accepted an individualist understanding of the so-called reproductive and sexual rights, and of reproductive health (which accepts sexual activity before and outside of marriage).

The problems in question are bound closely with the understanding of the structure and function of the family. The Cairo document speaks about a crisis of the traditional family and therefore promotes the so-called contemporary forms of it which, as it were, better correspond to the aspirations of today's people. We

mean here, for instance, the right of a single woman to have a baby or the right to establish families without marriage. Such understanding was confirmed by a representative of the UN. The majority of participants, however – excluding perhaps the representatives of feminist groups – defended the traditional form of the family and its rights. Only the family is the proper place and environment for a new life to come into the world and receive the love that it needs and the upbringing to moral responsibility, including preparation for responsible parenthood. In spite of the fact that some participants accepted the liberal attitudes that young people adopt, they were all anxious about whether non-family *milieus* or organizations could provide young people with a proper upbringing to responsibility and maturity, especially in the delicate area of sexuality. All unanimously stressed that children's upbringing to responsibility in this matter is a matter of right, but is at the same time the duty of every family. The Catholic delegation made a point that only spouses have the right and duty to freely decide about the number and the time of the conception of their offspring. That is why any national or international programmes which here limit the parental freedom must be discarded.

On the periphery of the discussion, it is worth noting how contemporary philosophical and social tendencies influence the change in the teaching of particular religious communities. To give an example, among representatives of Islam one could notice distinctly different interpretations of the Koran as to the question of the position and role of the woman in social life. There were also differences as to moral permissibility of abortion. The Catholics from North and South America present at the meeting in Genval, while

presenting Catholic moral principles, almost unanimously did not take advantage in a positive way of the documents of *Magisterium Ecclesiae*. Rather, they expressed their own opinions or the opinions of their *milieus*, which at times often clashed with the doctrine of the Church. That is why it is important and pertinent to repeat what John Paul II wrote, i.e., "The unity of the Church is demanded not only by Christians who reject or distort the truth of faith but also by those who disregard the moral obligation to which they are called by the Gospel" (*Veritatis splendor*, No. 26), and which *Magisterium Ecclesiae* interprets and gives as morally obligatory (see: *ibid.*, No. 110).

The meeting in Belgium allowed for the emphasis and confirmation that the greatest religions of the world are crucially interested in discussing and finding solutions for contemporary demographic problems. It showed also that religious communities can and should creatively contribute to the forming and putting into practice of the resolutions of population and development policy. Undoubtedly, the multid denominational and multicultural context of the meeting met the need for understanding and collaboration in these areas. All present agreed that one must support the initiatives to organize such meetings on the international, national or local scale.

*

Today, after the Cairo Conference, one can see that the course of its debates confirmed previous fears. The Conference maintained its principal thesis on the necessity of limiting birth-rate as the main way to solve demographic problems. The proposal to basically revise the socio-economic order of the world and the very model of development was not articulated

loudly enough. The present model of unjust development (which should read: the development of some parts of the world, and underdevelopment of many others) leads to specific threats to mankind, to an unjust distribution of natural resources, and in like manner to an increasing and blatant disproportion between the wealthy North and the poor South. Such being the state of affairs, we may speak about global injustice. The delegation of the Vatican See adopted an active and firm stance. A number of Catholic and Muslim countries did the same, with the effect that some alterations were made in the wording of the final text of the Conference (*Programme of Action*), a text which had aroused the greatest fear. Among these alterations one must above all mention the statement about non-permissibility of promoting abortion as a method of family planning ("In no case should abortion be promoted as a method of family planning," *Programme of Action*). This does not mean that the Cairo document rejected abortion in any way. In some places though, the tendency of the documents was changed for the better, by turning negative theses into positive ones (e.g., rather than as in the original text in the project in Chapter VIII B: "Infant and child mortality," we have: "Child survival and health"; VIII C: "Maternal morbidity and mortality" changed into: "Women's health and safe motherhood"). It is important that the document decidedly condemned any forms of constraint in population policy. Generally speaking, however, the Cairo text in its final version, among other problems, does not accept the principle that human life is inviolable from its conception, it accepts extramarital sex, calls for the popularizing of contraceptives, and apparently promotes and extends the concept of family into other relationship.

The final report from the meeting in Genval (*World Religions and the 1994 UN Conference on Population and Development. A Report on an International and Interfaith Consultation*), in accord with the promise made by a consultant member on behalf of the UN, was sent to all delegations of the Cairo Conference. The author of the paper, who was a participant in Genval, expressed his fears in the above report. His fears were confirmed in many points of the final version of

Programme of Action of the Cairo Conference. It is encouraging, however, that perhaps the positive changes which have been mentioned came into existence also thanks to the Belgium discussion. Certainly a fruit of the meeting is the rule introduced in Chapter II (*Principles*), which states that there is a necessity "to fully respect various religious and ethical values" while putting into practice the *Programme of Action* in individual states.

Translated by *Jan Kłos*