

# **TOWARDS A CULTURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND PEACE**

## **THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES**

### **INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE**

**DECEMBER 2-4 1999**

**Organised by the UNESCO Chair of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki**

An International Conference entitled "Towards a culture of human rights and peace. the Role of the Universities" was held at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki from 2-4 December 1999. Organised by the UNESCO Chair on Education for Human Rights Peace and Democracy, the Conference reunited over 25 participants representing Universities in Southern-Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean region. The participation from Greece was particularly strong: professors and students of the host University, representatives of other Greek universities, teachers and students of many schools from all over Greece, representatives of the Authorities etc.

It was one of the first international academic gatherings devoted to the promotion of the Culture of Peace, following the adoption by the General Assembly of the United Nations, on 13 September 1999, of the Declaration and Programme of Action for a Culture of Peace. The debates focused on the need to further define and operationalise the concept of a Culture of Peace at the level of higher education and the ways and means to engage universities in research, teaching, training, dissemination of information and building up awareness of the need to shift to a culture of peace as we approach the year 2000 and enter the new millennium.

The debates were very rich, providing an opportunity for a fruitful exchange of experience, of views, suggestions and recommendations as to how the universities can best engage themselves in the pursuit of a culture of peace. One trend in the debates emphasised the particular role that the universities can and should play in this endeavour. Through their research function the universities are called upon to study the causes of conflict in today 's world and to recommend ways in which conflicts could be addressed them before they break out. As educational institutions they have great moral prestige and can therefore influence public opinion in favour of peace, human security, respect for human rights and the advancement of democracy.

It was strongly pointed by all the speakers that the first way in which universities can contribute to a culture of peace is to enhance the quality of the teaching, research and service to the community. At the same time they can develop specific programs through curricular and extra curricular activities devoted to a culture of peace. They should be better geared towards the specific needs of students and of other categories of the population, particularly the very young.

Since a large number of international participants came from South-Eastern Europe, much of the discussion centred around the conflict in the region and the possible way in which the universities could contribute to remove their causes and turn the Balkan region into a zone of mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence among the countries and the ethnic groups in the region. Revising the teaching of history, of geography, of languages and of many other university subjects could make an important contribution in that direction. Above all else, the universities could set a good example by establishing contacts among themselves and working together. The fact that there are several UNESCO Chairs devoted to human rights, democracy and peace in the sub-region is encouraging. They decided to set up an active network and to attract other universities and research institutions to their work.

The last part of the debates was devoted to a presentation of the Program of the UNESCO Chair on Education for Human Rights, Democracy and Peace at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The main feature of the Chair is its inter-disciplinary character. With the support of UNESCO, of the Greek Ministry of Education, the UNESCO Chair has succeeded to build up an inter-disciplinary program at the under-graduate level in which over 90 Professors from 30 Schools of the University have been involved. At the same time the UNESCO Chair participates in the European Master 's Degree in Human Rights and Democratisation. The UNESCO Chair promotes educational programs devoted to human rights and peace in primary and secondary schools.

Concrete proposals for further action were agreed upon, particularly the reinforcement of the UNESCO Balkan Peace News and Media Network for which the UNESCO Chair at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and Saint Cyril and Methodius University at Skopje have special responsibilities.