

Research Notes

Peace Education and Spirituality at the United Nations: Tai Ji Men and the Road to the International Day of Conscience

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ABSTRACT: Days of observance included in the United Nations official calendar may be proposed by NGOs but need the support of member states to be approved. The article explores Tai Ji Men's narrative about education, peace, and conscience, how the movement was able to gather international support for its discourse, and how some states, including Bahrain, saw a political advantage in embracing and endorsing the proposal of the International Day of Conscience. It further describes the road to the 2019 UN resolution on the International Day of Conscience and tries to answer the question how a comparatively little-known Asian spiritual movement was able to persuade most of the United Nations member states that the link between education, peace, and conscience should be symbolically reaffirmed at the global level, and to endorse a proposal that was in fact rooted in a specific spiritual worldview.

KEYWORDS: United Nations Days of Observance, International Day of Conscience, Tai Ji Men, Dr. Hong Tao-Tze, FOWPAL.

The United Nations Days of Observance

The United Nations has more than two hundred days of observance in its calendar (United Nations 2023a). From time to time, voices are heard that they are too many. However, each day has its defenders. One often mentioned example that the calendar is too crowded is that there is a World Toilet Day, celebrated on November 19. However, if one looks at the process that led to introducing this day of observance in 2013, it emerges that it calls the attention to a real problem,

i.e., that, as of 2022, 3.6 billion people in the world live without safely managed sanitation, which put their health and even their lives at risk. The day, the United Nations says, aims at “making an invisible problem visible” (United Nations 2022a). Toilets are rarely mentioned in polite company, but living without a toilet can kill.

Other days of observance clearly correspond to political games played by member states. For example, there are days of observances for each official language of the United Nations (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish), but later Portuguese, which has two hundred million native speakers was added. In 2021, UNESCO insisted that at least one African language should be celebrated by a United Nations observance day, and the World Kiswahili Language Day was included (UNESCO 2022).

The introduction in the calendar of a new day of observance normally requires sponsorship of at least one member state and a vote by the General Assembly (in other cases, the request comes from UNESCO or other UN agencies). In a field connected with spirituality, there is an International Day of Yoga, June 21. A look at how it was introduced evidences a large campaign by India, which gathered the support of another 175 member states. India would never claim that yoga is a simple gymnastic. This is a Western view of yoga Indians reject, as Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi told in clear terms to the UN General Assembly when the day of observance was introduced in 2014. However, Modi was careful in consistently using the word “spiritual” rather than “religious” (United Nations 2022b).

It is not the only case where a day of observance has a connection with religion or spirituality. The United Nations cannot promote a particular religion but would honor religious figures or events. March 24, the International Day for the Right to the Truth Concerning Gross Human Rights Violations and for the Dignity of Victims, honors El Salvador’s Archbishop Óscar Romero (1917–1980), who was murdered on 24 March 1980 for his public denunciations of human rights abuses in his country (United Nations 2023b). Romero has been canonized as a saint by the Catholic Church. His defense of human rights of all Salvadoreans went beyond his confessional identity but was at the same time rooted in Catholic social teaching.

February 4 is the International Day of Human Fraternity (United Nations 2023c). It was first celebrated in 2021, and remembers the date when, on

February 4, 2019, Pope Francis and Ahmad al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, and the highest scholarly authority in Sunni Islam, signed in Abu Dhabi “A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together.” Fraternity and peace are not necessarily religious values, but the approach of the Abu Dhabi document was openly theological (Francis and al-Tayyeb 2021).

On the other hand, attempts to have the United Nations recognize as a day of observance the World Day of Prayer, started by Christian women in 1887 in the United States, have never gathered sufficient support. Although the day is now celebrated by believers of several religions, its origins are too clearly Christian and confessional. Tai Ji Men is now proposing October 16 as World Prayer Day (Hong 2022a), using a slightly different name with respect to the already existing, but not recognized by the UN, World Day of Prayer.

The proposal was launched through a spectacular event in Taiwan on October 16, 2022, with performances, songs, dances, and speeches and representatives of several religions in attendance. It remains to be seen whether once again “prayer” will be regarded as a religious concept incompatible with the secular character of the United Nations. However, Tai Ji Men may counter this objection by quoting academic literature on how the concept of “prayer” is now being increasingly secularized and may indicate a connection with universe or nature experienced also by those who do not believe in God.

In fact, the first initiative for introducing new days of observance often comes from NGOs. Italian scholar Raffaella Baritono has noted that this model corresponds to how Eleanor Roosevelt, the American First Lady who had a profound influence on shaping the United Nations, saw the future of the organization (Baritono 2017). For her, the traditional American idea of “public diplomacy,” where states mobilize NGOs for their own purposes, should have been replaced or at least supplemented by a “diplomacy from below,” where NGOs propose their own initiatives and states may decide to support them (Baritono 2017, 5). Roosevelt’s idea was that “even ordinary citizens” may advance proposals that may eventually be accepted by the United Nations (Baritono 2017, 2). However, the system only allows this to happen with the decisive support of member states.

Dr. Hong Tao-Tze and the Movement of an Era of Conscience

The problems in Taiwan (Chao, Chang, Yu, and Chen 2021) did not prevent Tai Ji Men and its leader, Dr. Hong Tao-Tze, from promoting high profile initiatives for world peace, an activity he had already started in 1968, while organizing international events and bringing traditional Chinese culture abroad through thousands of musical and martial arts performances.

In 1999, Hong started his cooperation with the Association of World Citizens (AWC), which had been founded in 1975 by Douglas Mattern (1933–2011), a well-known American peace and disarmament activist, and had been granted consultative status at the United Nations' ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council). Mattern believed that, by joining forces in an international association, common citizens may effectively assist the United Nations institutions and cooperate in the work of conflict resolution and promotion of peace.

In 2000, Mattern appointed Hong as a member of the AWC's Advisory Board and Honorary Vice-President. After Mattern died, in 2011, the new AWC President, René Wadlow, a US-born French academic specialized in Development Studies, appointed Hong as Vice-President of the organization (Introigne et al. 2020).

In 2014, Tai Ji Men was at the core of a coalition, including the Association of World Citizens and FOWPAL, the Foundation for World Peace and Love that Dr. Hong had founded in 2000, which launched the Movement of An Era of Conscience. Hong believes that positive change may really be achieved, if only more humans would learn, in the words of Lourdes Gisela Victoria-Kruse, Ambassador of Dominican Republic to the UN in Vienna, who spoke at a FOWPAL event in 2019, to

follow their conscience, speak conscientious words, do conscientious deeds, and spread the positive impacts of conscience to change the world for the better (FOWPAL 2019).

Traditional Chinese culture, according to Dr. Hong, focuses on ethics, propriety, and conscience. These are universal values that, if properly understood and applied, would guarantee world peace and a civilization based on universal brotherhood and love. Promoting love and peace throughout the world is regarded by Tai Ji Men as an essential part of its *dizi* (disciples)'s effort at self-cultivation.

Dizi are first taught love and peace for themselves, but gradually the scope of peace and love extends to the whole universe. The practice of martial arts is not outside this field since, according to Hong, appropriate physical exercises always also have effects on the mental and spiritual dimensions, both individually and collectively.

On February 16, 2014, the Movement of an Era of Conscience was launched through simultaneous events in twenty-five venues in the United States, Canada, England, the Netherlands, Italy, and Australia. An endorsement campaign was launched in August 2014 and presented by Dr. Hong at the 65th Annual UN DPI/NGO Conference in New York. On October 5, 2014, a “Forum on the Awakening of Conscience” was organized in Los Angeles and attended, among others, by Congressman Ed Royce, the chairperson of the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

The “Declaration for the Movement of an Era of Conscience” defined conscience as “the ultimate judge of a person’s doing” (Association of World Citizens, FOWPAL, and Tai Ji Men Qigong Academy 2014). This definition tried to encompass both the religious idea, which pre-dates Christianity and is already found in early Hindu and Buddhist texts, that conscience is the voice of a divine ultimate power resonating inside every human being, and the secular notion of conscience as a deep layer of our psychological personality that was shaped during human history by the collective process we call civilization. Dr. Hong believed that his definition could be embraced by both believers and non-believers. He also called conscience “the positive energy that stabilizes the world” and balances technological development with “spiritual enlightenment.” It was easy to see that Dr. Hong was speaking from his own spiritual experience. However, the Declaration insisted more on the fruits of a return to conscience than on what conscience is according to various religious or non-religious traditions. Dr. Hong maintained that “conscience is the wellspring of love and peace,” “breeds sustainability,” “is the fundamental pillar of a harmonious society,” and “leads to good governance” (Association of World Citizens, FOWPAL, and Tai Ji Men Qigong Academy 2014).

Many could agree with such statements, which were further presented by Tai Ji Men at various conferences in 2015 and 2016, including the 66th UN DPI/NGO Conference in Gyeongju, South Korea. Participation in international events led to a momentous invitation to Dr. Hong to visit Bahrain in May 2017, where he

met with cabinet ministers and religious leaders and promoted the Era of Conscience document (FOWPAL 2020, 30).

The Road to the International Day of Conscience

Dr. Hong was in New York in September 2017 during the 72nd Session of the UN General Assembly. He organized a World Leader Summit of Love and Peace, and continued his cooperation with Bahrain, which was joined by Kiribati as another staunch supporter. Next year, on April 5, 2018, the Permanent Mission of Kiribati to the UN co-organized with FOWPAL and the Association of World Citizens a World Peace and Love Conference at the UN in New York. Teburoro Tito, Kiribati's Ambassador to the UN, called Dr. Hong "a modern Confucius" (FOWPAL 2020, 34).

Based on the idea expressed at the April 5 conference, from July 2 to 6 members of the Permanent Mission of Kiribati to the UN and of FOWPAL gathered at the Joint Commonwealth Office in New York to draft a resolution designating April 5 as the International Day of Conscience. The draft resolution was presented at an event hosted by the Permanent Mission of Kiribati at the same Joint Commonwealth Office on July 31, where eighteen other Permanent Missions were represented, including Bahrain's (FOWPAL 2020, 43–9).

From then on, Bahrain took the lead in sponsoring the resolution making April 5 a UN day of observance as the International Day of Conscience. From September 28 to October 1, 2018, another World Leader Summit of Love and Peace was co-organized at the United Nations headquarters in New York by the Permanent Mission of Bahrain and FOWPAL. The President of Kiribati, Taneti Maamau, also attended. This happened during the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, and Bahrain took the opportunity to gather other states that would sponsor the resolution. Another member state that emerged as a staunch supporter was Equatorial Guinea.

In November 2018, Dr. Hong and a Tai Ji Men-FOWPAL delegation visited Bahrain again. On February 5, 2019, it was the Permanent Mission of Equatorial Guinea that co-organized with FOWPAL yet another World Leader Summit of Love and Peace at the United Nations in New York. At that time, Equatorial Guinea was a non-permanent member of the Security Council, and the President

of the African country, Teodoro Oblang Nguema Mbasogo, personally participated in the Summit. The knot of the religious or secular nature of conscience was not really cut. The African country's President stated that "Our country, in spite of being secular, eminently believes in God" (FOWPAL 2020, 80).

Next year, 2019, it was again the Permanent Mission of Bahrain that co-sponsored with FOWPAL the World Leader Summit of Love and Peace, which took place on February 6 at the ECOSOC chamber of the UN headquarters in New York. The day before, February 5, Dr. Hong launched a global endorsement campaign for a "Declaration of International Day of Conscience" (Hong 2019). Conscience was defined as the "wellspring of love," but again rather than discussing the meaning of the word the Declaration insisted on conscience's positive fruits.

On April 5, 2019, the Permanent Mission of Bahrain to the UN launched the International Day of Conscience at an event in Vienna, to which I was also invited. My impression was that the event, attended by diplomats, religious leaders, and businesspersons from several countries avoided specific political content and was mostly aimed at eliciting sympathy for Tai Ji Men and their proposal.

In June 2019, Bahrain asked Dr. Hong and FOWPAL to prepare a concept note about a final version of a draft resolution to be adopted by the UN General Assembly proclaiming April 5 the International Day of Conscience. In July, Dr. Hong traveled to Kiribati and other small Oceanian countries to secure support for the resolution.

On July 19, Bahrain submitted the draft resolution to the 73rd General Assembly of the United Nations, to include April 5 in the UN calendar of days of observance as the International Day of Conscience. The resolution presented the Day of Conscience as

a means of regularly mobilizing the efforts of the international community to promote peace, tolerance, inclusion, understanding and solidarity, in order to build a sustainable world of peace, solidarity and harmony (Permanent Mission of Bahrain to the United Nations 2019).

The meaning of "conscience" was not defined. Another twenty-seven countries co-sponsored the resolution, and it was adopted by the General Assembly on July 25 (United Nations General Assembly 2019). Unfortunately, the large events

planned for the first International Day of Conscience officially part of the UN calendar, April 5, 2020, had to be moved online due to the COVID pandemic.

The Meaning and Consequences of the United Nations Proclamation

The International Day of Conscience is now here to stay. Tai Ji Men is proposing three other days of observance: the World Prayer Day (Hong 2022a), the World Day of the Power of Hope (Hong 2022b), and the International Day Against Judicial and Tax Persecution by State Power, which has an obvious reference to the movement's own problems in Taiwan (Wadlow and Hong 2023), whose date would be December 19, the day the persecution of Tai Ji Men started in Taiwan in 1996 (Chao, Chang, Yu, and Chen 2021, 26–8). The promotion of these three new days of observance has just started, and it may be too early to speculate on their chances of being adopted by the United Nations.

As for the International Day of Conscience, I would propose a final comment on the two main actors of the process that led to its adoption as a day of observance. Tai Ji Men, as a private spiritual movement, demonstrated considerable skills in mobilizing resources, entering the mechanisms of the United Nations, obtaining the cooperation of states, and downplaying references to conscience that might have looked as too much connected with spirituality, at the same time without denying them.

This was, in Eleanor Roosevelt's terms, "diplomacy from below." However, "diplomacy from below" can only achieve results at the United Nations when it is supported by the "diplomacy from above" of the member states. The result was achieved thanks to the efforts of Bahrain, seconded by Kiribati and Equatorial Guinea.

Why did these states support Tai Ji Men in its effort to promote the International Day of Conscience? Some of their leaders probably genuinely liked the idea of conscience, which resonates both with Islam and Christianity, the amiable personality of Dr. Hong, and the contagious enthusiasm of the *dizi*. On the other hand, the United Nations is about politics. Bahrain has been increasingly active in recent years in promoting itself as a world leader in interreligious dialogue and peace conferences, which might also have been a way to balance accusations of human rights violations at home, a problem it shares

with Equatorial Guinea. For small states, sponsoring a noble cause and a value few would disagree with such as conscience is also a way to gain visibility. Tai Ji Men skillfully maneuvered through these different interests, proving it has a good understanding of how the United Nations work, and achieved what was for it a significant cultural and spiritual success.

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