

## The Role of International Education in World Peace

by Sebastian de Assis

The U.S. government, preoccupied as it is with the economic, political, and military leadership that the United States exerts abroad, has left it up to us, American international educators, to take charge of leading our nation—and the world—in promoting worldwide peace.

Whether teaching peace is actually possible is something that should be investigated, for the new millennium brings unprecedented challenges with associated questions that remain to be answered. Is there hope for humanity in a world obsessed with technological development and economic expansion? And, most importantly, can international education help to bridge the abyss between the highly sophisticated intellectual individual and the emotionally and spiritually underdeveloped human being? These and many other questions may find their answers in the possibility of teaching peace.

### What Does Peace Mean?

Throughout history, peace has always been regarded as a blessing and its opposite, war, as a scourge. Yet, it is only since the end of the Middle Ages that philosophers and statesmen have reflected systematically on the problem of peace. Nevertheless, it was not until the start of the nineteenth century that attempts to establish worldwide international peace came about, when the Napoleonic Wars destroyed the balance of power that had been the foundation of international peace since the end of the Middle Ages.

In the twentieth century, the issue of peace became more complex and infinitely more delicate. After experiencing two devastating world

wars, humanity has tried to minimize the risks of self-annihilation through the establishment of international organizations, including the League of Nations and the United Nations to secure peace. To date, such organizations have been unable to put international peace on a more secure basis.

Inferentially, peace in a historical context has been linked primarily to the idea of the absence of belligerent aggression and organized armed conflict between nations. In the collective sense, peace intrinsically relates to social justice; and in economic terms, that means a fair distribution of wealth among the individuals and nations of the world. This is clearly stated in the Second Medium-Term Plan, 1984-1989, 4XC/4 Approved by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in 1983, Chapter 12, p.259:

"There can be no genuine peace when the most elementary human rights are violated, or while situations of injustice continue to exist....Peace is incompatible with malnutrition and extreme poverty....The only lasting peace is a just peace based on respect for human rights. Furthermore, a just peace calls for the establishment of an equitable international order."

Building from this, I would like to propose the following definition of peace: Peace is the offspring of the holy matrimony of love and justice. When love and justice join together, peace is the inevitable outcome. Hence, without love and justice peace cannot be born.

### International Education and the International Community

The investigation of the role of inter-

national education in world peace must take into consideration the effects and consequences of globalization of the world economy in the international community.

It is undeniable that international commerce has succeeded to a remarkable degree in creating a global society, but a global society primarily based on economic relations. In fact, the idea of internationalism today is almost exclusively related to economic relations driven by market forces. Furthermore, many individuals, groups, and organizations erroneously perceive internationalism as a dictatorship that will take over their rights, liberty, property, and everything else they hold dear. However, this is fallacious thinking, for genuine internationalism seeks to foster understanding and appreciation for the fascinating cultural diversity in the world.

As I mentioned earlier, international organizations have not been successful in securing peace. I am therefore convinced that international education is the main, and perhaps the only, vehicle that can lead and prepare the world community to establish a social order conducive to peace. Barring that, peace cannot be achieved.

However, in order to carry out this lofty goal, international education must first liberate itself from the excessive focus on economic objectives and dedicate more time and attention to bona fide human development. How? This is what I suggest.

### A Plan of Action

Postsecondary international exchange programs should not be limited to offering internships primarily

based on economic function interests. Further, businesses and international organizations should become essential partners in university level internship programs, where international education would play an important part in promoting international peace. And last but not least, international internships should be encouraged among nations with notorious diplomatic, economic, political, or any other form of disagreement and conflict. This would help the upcoming generation of leaders rely on common grounds of understanding and humanity to help bridge any differences that might otherwise cause feelings of division and hostility.

In this visionary approach, the United States could play an unprecedented leadership role by initiating the process. In a nation of immigrants, with an enormous diversity of people and cultures integrated into the American culture, the most powerful country on earth could lead the world—and humanity—to a level of international understanding that transcends the narrow economic leadership it currently exerts. But if our politicians are too busy entertaining themselves in partisan political battles, it is the duty of the American international educators community to take action and initiate the process the best way we can. Our future may depend on it.

—Sebastian de Assis, Ph.D., is the director of The Educational Center for Human Development. This article summarizes his presentation at the NAFSA Region I Conference in Eugene, Oregon, in October 1999. He can be reached via e-mail at [assis@peak.org](mailto:assis@peak.org).