

**Statement to the Commission on Population and Development
Acting as Preparatory Committee for the Special Session
of the General Assembly**

As written

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TO THE THIRTY-SECOND SESSION OF THE COMMISSION ON POPULATION
AND DEVELOPMENT, ACTING AS THE PREPARATORY COMMITTEE FOR THE
SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON THE REVIEW AND
APPRAISAL OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAM OF ACTION OF
THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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Madam Chairman, let me first thank you for the opportunity to address this important assembly. I can be brief, since my point is simple: Religion does count. Religion, especially its formal expression in theological terms, aims at describing the meaning of human **life** and destiny. As such, the world's religions make claims regarding the very essence of what it means to be human. Religious doctrine and practice, without doubt, have a direct impact on the overall social organization and political balance of many countries and even entire regions. We need, for example, only look to recent events in parts of the world where theology -- I prefer to call it religious ideology in this context -- has been used to rationalize blatant human rights abuses.

The influence of religious thinking and practice definitely plays an influential role in the discussion of population and development. It is important to recognize the very real power of religion and its capacity to either further or to frustrate the Cairo Program of Action. To ignore, dismiss, or attempt to mute religious voices is a mistake. Religious

forces -- which have perennially proven themselves resilient and irrepressible -- simply will not go away. More importantly, there is a distinct danger that only the strongest or most prominent religious traditions will get a **full** hearing. Madam Chairman, it is essential that the vast diversity of religious insight and opinion be enlisted in furthering the enlightened agenda that was crafted five years ago at Cairo. I can assure you that people of faith will support the Program of Action because its foundations and aspirations closely parallel central moral convictions of the world's major religious traditions.

The values expressed in the Program of Action adopted in Cairo give expression to a set of moral sensibilities that are shared across religious traditions. Population and development arise quite naturally within the context of religious reflection. In many faith communities there is a comprehensive understanding of the relationship of human beings to the earth; in Hinduism a great appreciation of diversity and tolerance; in Buddhism a deep understanding of suffering and compassion; in Confucianism a powerful awareness of reciprocity and duty in human relationships; in Taoism an enduring emphasis on harmony and balance; in Judaism a profound regard for the sanctity of life; in Christianity a rich understanding of charity and mercy; in Islam a boundless devotion to equality and justice. These attributions have not been exclusive but are embraced across religious boundaries. They are religion's shared gifts to the world community. I urge, then, that the Preparatory Committee turn to the world's religious traditions as eloquent and substantive allies in charting the course for the continuing implementation of the Cairo Plan of Action. In closing, Madam Chairman I would like to offer a statement that more fully articulates the connections between the Program of Action and the **fundamental** convictions of many of the world's religious traditions. This statement (see attached) was developed by *Religion*

Counts, which is an independent, international inter-religious group of scholars, experts, and leaders convened by the Park Ridge Center for the Study of Health, Faith, and Ethics and Catholics for a Free Choice.