

Humn Rights, Spiritual Values, and Political Realities

The 50th Anniversary of the United Nations

I wish first of all to say how honored I am to be invited to give this address in this very prestigious and famous university. I have been here on several previous occasions. In fact, one summer my young family and I stayed in the camping place near the lake right on the edge of the city, and we climbed the tower of the Cathedral. On another occasion I was here for a conference, and I delivered a paper on esthetics. I am very proud that my student, Kjell Lejon, who is currently Chancellor of the Cathedral, also took the time to come to California to earn a doctorate in religious studies on the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California. I am drawn to this city by a kind of magnetic pull. My grandfather was born in Vasteros, and my grandmother in Vastervik. In so many ways, because of its combination of higher education and religious life, Uppsala is root, core, and source-city for me. When I trace both my educational and my spiritual heritages back, I come to Uppsala. So, as I have said, I am very pleased to be here.

I should also explain something about who I am. For some thirty years I have been teaching religious studies in California. Along the way I also became director of a think-tank called The Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, which had been started by Robert Hutchins. It was there that I met Gunnar and

Alva Myrdal, who were also fellows of the Center. I have also taken some responsibility for strengthening and advancing the humanities in all levels of education, within the United States. And, to bring this autobiographical portion of my address to some closure, I should add that I was a candidate for the United States Congress last year, as a Democrat, and I lost by about a thousand votes out of about 214,000 votes cast. I'm not happy with the outcome, but I'm told that we did very well in a year in which Republicans swamped Democrats. So I trust that this is enough by way of introduction.

My intention today is to address some of the issues human-kind faces within the global context. You probably know that we have an awful quarrel going on in the United States at the moment, a quarrel that threatens to split the people of the nation almost as powerfully as the nation was split during the Vietnam War era. At one level, the quarrel is about the role of national government -- how large it should be, how invasive of human lives we should allow it to become, how it is to be funded, and how it relates to the private sector. At another level, the quarrel reflects divergent opinion on whatever it was that happened in the society in the 1960s. As you know, this was the time when the "counter-culture" was born, the era of "the flower children," the time when virtually everyone was admonished to "question authority," and many people did. It was also the time when a concerted effort was made to advance *civil rights*, to "liberate" women, and to begin to live in more deliberate consciousness of the dictates of the environment. Now, in the mid 1990s, thirty

years after the events of the 1960s, there is serious questioning about the *products* of the counter culture. Many, within the society, believe that dysfunctional families, higher divorce rates, illegitimate births, increased homosexual behavior, the rise in violent crime, drug addiction, and, most especially, the licensing of abortion should be attributed to the full-scale assault on traditional values that accompanied the cultural shifts of the 1960s. So one finds candidates for public office in the United States running on traditional values slogans. Many within my country are wishing to return to the time of presumed stability prior to the 1960s. So much of the legislation that is being considered in Washington, D.C. has the purpose of reducing excesses -- excesses in terms of budgetary expenditures and excesses in terms of the kinds of regulatory principles that were used to enforce the protective environmental measures as well as affirmative action measures that came into prominence during this same period of time.

Now why bring up matters of this kind during an address that celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations? The answer is clear. Accompanying this reductive and restrictive governmental tendency is the rebirth of a spirit of isolation in U.S. attitudes toward other countries of the world. And this neo-isolation has come to focus particularly on the role of the United Nations worldwide. President Clinton has been working diligently to convince Americans that an isolationist attitude is extremely short-sighted. But the painful memory of the Vietnam

War, in which 58,000 Americans lost their lives for uncertain and contested purpose, together with the ambiguous outcome of the Somalia excursion, have made Americans wary of joining military ventures which may bring loss of life. In addition, there is a strong current of anti "one-worldism" in the United States today. An increasingly influential religious fundamentalism has joined itself to an increasingly influential neo-nationalism; neither of these has much tolerance for global alliances, particularly if such alliances would make the U.S. dependent on other powers. A growing number of nationalistically-oriented citizens are calling for an end to U.S. membership in the United Nations. Legislation is now pending that would disallow American combat forces to be directed by other than American commanders. And the same neo-isolationist tendencies are reflected in the heightened and nearly volatile concern about restricting immigration, maintaining strict border control, and urging that the domestic market be dominated by products that are "Made in the U.S.A." It follows that many Americans would prefer to exercise their rights and responsibilities throughout the world through strictly American means, rather than depending upon organizations such as the United Nations. In my judgment, this tendency is congruent with the widespread belief that, in most instances, individual initiative is to be preferred above collective or cooperative action.

I must say that I have some trouble giving an address like this because I am an American, in many ways I am proud to be an American, and I think it is no sign of good manners to travel

to another country to hang out dirty laundry from home. But what I must say, on this anniversary occasion, is that the case for the United Nations is being rather severely tested in the U.S. right now. Indeed, as we speak, the United States is in arrears in its financial support of the U.N. Congress is having a protracted debate about which portions of the U.N. budget to fund, and which portions to try to eliminate. And the congressional consensus on these matters will not be easy to achieve.

But my intention in describing this situation is to point to a significant development in the world since the end of the Cold War, that is, since the Berlin Wall was taken down, the Soviet Union was broken up into smaller pieces, and the Baltic and former European eastern bloc countries achieved some degree of new autonomy. Permit me to recall a visit I made to the Soviet Union some years ago in the company of American veterans of the War in Vietnam, who were traveling there to meet with veterans of the War in Afghanistan. On the first day of our arrival, we were greeted by then Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev who made reference to the view of the planet earth that had been confirmed once again by the cosmonauts. Mr. Gorbachev said that some cosmonauts had just returned from outer space, and had brought testimony that the earth is singular, and, therefore, the inhabitants of earth are members of the same human family. He proceeded to greet us as "brothers and sisters." It was a moving salutation.

But in the years since that time, the inhabitants of earth have not been demonstrating that they (or we) are members of

the same human family. Rather, in so many sections of the world, the nationalistic tendency has been accelerating, as is consciousness of ethnic identity as well as commitment to religious or theological orthodoxies. In other words, since the end of the Cold War the human family seems to be more conscious of difference and diversity than it is of unity and commonality. Indeed, if one wishes to push this observation to its extreme, we have almost reached the *atomistic world*, where each unit seeks its own autonomy, where each unit is a point of orientation unto itself. I don't know if the slogan is prevalent here in Sweden as yet, but in the United States one finds thousands of automobiles with the owners' creed on the bumper sticker: "Practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty." [repeat] Do you have one like that here? The first time I saw this sign, when I was in Hawaii, I was attracted to it. But then I started thinking about the word *random*, as distinct from *deliberate*, as distinct from *dependable*. And I recalled that what people fear most today is another form of randomness, that is *random violence*. Frankly, I don't have much confidence in a world in which both *virtue* and *cruelty* have become random. And I have talked about randomness in this way simply to point out that the engagement of reality by normatized atomization has now developed to alarming proportions.

There is a related post Cold War development that Mr. Gorbachev might not have foreseen. I was invited to a meeting with him in California in 1991, I believe, at which time he offered a summary of the ideas and convictions that led him to postulate

both *perestroika* and . I couldn't believe my ears when I heard him say that he was indebted to some American philosophers, "John Dewey," he mentioned, "and other philosophical pragmatists." Then he went on to explain that Dewey provided some instrumentation for him to criticize *totalitarianism*. His statement went something like this: "You know, it is a difficult thing to criticize totalitarianism from the inside." Somehow he learned to do it, he attested, after reading John Dewey. And when I had opportunity to question him on this matter subsequently, he also paid high tribute to Karl Popper, I presume, for the latter's book, The Open Society.

Once again, the expectations that might have been mounted when the Berlin Wall was brought down and the Soviet Union was disassembled have not materialized. After the world had witnessed in totalitarianism the power of a self-contained and self-consistent ideology, and the stultifying grip such an ideology can have over a people, one would have expected that, in the post-totalitarian period, ideology would have been jettisoned or put on the history shelf for awhile. This, surely, is what has happened in the Czech Republic, under the powerful influence of Vaclav Havel, and his colleagues. The "velvet revolution" that occurred in Prague in 1989 was a deliberate *anti-ideological* movement. Indeed, Havel has addressed this subject on numerous occasions. For example, when tracing intellectual developments from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment to the present, he calls it *the era of ideologies*, where the primary intention was to discover "a universal theory of the world." Listen

to his analysis:

Communism was the perverse extreme of this trend. It was an attempt, on the basis of a few propositions masquerading as the only scientific truth, to organize all of life according to a single model, and to subject it to central planning and control regardless of whether or not that was what life wanted.

Then he explains why the system fell apart:

Communism was not defeated by military force, but by life, by the human spirit, by conscience, by the resistance of Being and man to manipulation. It was defeated by a revolt of color, authenticity, history in all its variety, and *human individuality against imprisonment within a uniform ideology* [italics mine].

If we had more time on this point today, I'd be eager to illustrate that when Vaclav Havel selects the alternative to ideological imprisonment, that is, when he references the world of the human spirit, conscience, authenticity, and the like, he draws upon the insights of Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, who was born in Moravia, and is credited with the concept *Lebenswelt* (or "life-world") to which Havel was introduced by the Czech philosopher Jan Patocka.

Why rehearse all of this in an address in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations? Well, chiefly to make two points. The first, that the expectation that the world would

come more and more to form a family of nations has not come to pass, although the creation of the European Union is an impressive authenticating example. And the second, that the expectation that the ideological rendering of reality would be followed by both non- and a-ideological engagements has not come to pass either, that is, in clear, unambiguous form. For just as the breakup of empires has led to increasing atomisation, so too has the post-ideological age been marked by re-ideologisation.

And this brings us back to the situation now occurring in the United States that I cited earlier. The resistance to United Nations thinking is being sponsored by a right-wing ideology. If I can apply a historical analogy, think of it as being similar to what happened following the Reformation of the 16th century. The Reformation was a revolt against Scholasticism, but what occurred in certain quarters was a deliberate "re-Scholasticization." In other words, it appears that many of those who were most strongly opposed to Communism during the Cold War years, and thus understood themselves to be locked in ideological battle, have reinvented or reconstructed an ideological stance to guide their attitudes and behavior in the post Cold War era. This ideology positions itself as being determined to counter any form of one-worldism. For decades now it has been opposed to the World Council of Churches. It is openly suspicious of the European Union. It was disdainful of the recent Conference on Women that occurred in Beijing under UN sponsorship. Indeed,

it sees all cooperative international, intergovernmental movements of this kind as being intent on creating the "false kingdom," yes, behind it all, the kingdom of the anti-Christ, the pretender Kingdom of God. And this is why there so much ridicule is being heaped on the United Nations, for it is being viewed by the ideologs of the right as the most potent vehicle to usher in the false kingdom in the huge cosmic drama that foreshadows, in these last days, the return of Jesus Christ. Admittedly, one cannot find all of the prominent conservative politicians giving this explanation in just these words. But one can find these very words in the literature of the Christian Coalition, that powerful right-wing religious activist movement, with which every Republican candidate for political office must come to satisfactory terms.

You recognize, of course, that I am not on this side of things, and that I stand very strongly for the alternative. Why? Because I've been trained, may I say it, by Scandinavian sensitivities, which is far more practical, far more benevolent, and far less *cosmic* in its writing of world history. I have been reading your periodicals and journals, and come across article after article that call attention to the rejection of histories of human experience that invoke the grand, overarching theories. In this respect, I see the spirit of Vaclav Havel here, where the meaning of life is not to be deduced from ideological construction, but is to be found in the life-world. I have learned much from some of your own teachers and professors about the pre-eminence of "ordinary life philosophy," that is, about the very personal and

practical ways in which life itself is engaged and respected. And these ways are so totally in contrast to the expectation that one can subscribe to an ideology, then use that ideology to discover life.

The Danish writer, Soren Kierkegaard, tells of the man who is walking down a street in Copenhagen. It has been raining, I believe, and his pants had gotten wrinkled. So, it is with delight that he sees a sign in the window of a tailor shop that reads "Trousers Pressed Here." But, to his dismay, when he goes into the shop, he learns that the sign is for sale: he can purchase the sign. Kierkegaard says that this is too often the way it is with philosophy. The philosopher hangs out a sign that says "Truth available here," but when one goes inside, one learns that one can buy a philosophy, or another one of many isms. The same is sometimes true, Kierkegaard chides, with the church, which holds out the sign, "Salvation here." But when one goes inside, one discovers that one can purchase the religion. And, in education, not knowledge, but a purchased diploma. A bit cynical, I'd say, but the story makes a good point.

But listen to the way Dag Hammarskjold, who was Secretary General of the United Nations, and who is buried nearby, put it:

From generations of soldiers and government officials on my father's side, I inherited a belief that no life was more satisfactory than one of selfless service to your country -- or to humanity.....

[And] From scholars and clergymen on my mother's side I inherited a belief that, in the very radical sense

of the Gospels, all men were equals as children of God, and should be met and treated by us as our masters.

Hammarskjold continues, explaining how he put these ideas together. In my judgment, it is one of the most compelling testaments of faith that has ever been recorded. He refers to "the beliefs in which I was once brought up" and "which, in fact, had given my life direction." And what are these beliefs or convictions? Hammarskjold's answer: the explanation of how one should live a life of active social service in full harmony with oneself as a member of the community of the spirit." This is also the sense of life that was recorded by "great medieval mystics for whom self-surrender had been the way to self-realisation," for whom "singleness of mind and inwardness had found strength to say Yes to every demand which the needs of their neighbors made them face." In my judgment, Hammarskjold's book Markings is one of the most compelling testaments ever recorded.

But there is additional testimony upon which one can draw. In this connection, I have found myself drawn particularly to the writings of the great nineteenth century Danish theologian and hymn writer, N. F. S. Grundtvig, who, in a variety of ways, advanced the dictum "human first" as a way of understanding oneself and the persons with which one is obliged to deal. Yes, Grundtvig knew that humans were also Danes, and were also Lutherans, and probably were also members of one or another political party, and were representative of one or another ethnic identity. No matter. Whenever a secondary characteristic was

placed more prominently than the primary characteristic, that person was dehumanized to this extent. Not Danish, not Lutheran, but human, and then Danish, and then Lutheran, and so forth.

Then there is also the powerful influence of Nathan Soderblom, the great Archbishop of the Church of Sweden, who is also buried nearby. You know Soderblom for a variety of reasons. I'd like today simply to reference his dedication to understanding the ongoing development of religious sensibility, from earliest times until the present. He was keenly interested in what this development was accumulating towards. How would it affect how humans would live together side by side during the course of our shared time here on earth? I like it that Soderblom was concerned about the fate of the world as he was also keenly interested in human character and human temperament. I recognize that he invested deeply in the message of Eric Gustaf Geijer, who spoke and wrote about "being at home in existence," combining interest in the uniqueness of each personality with appreciation for the way in which each is linked to each other.

But, finally, I'd like to invoke the witness of the Dalai Lama, with whom I had the honor and pleasure of spending one very inspiring day not long ago. My responsibility was to introduce the Dalai Lama to an audience at UCLA. Beforehand, he asked me what I would be saying, and I responded that I would say some things about him, listen to his talk, then field questions. He said, "no, but what will be talking about?" And I said, "what

would you like to talk about?" And he said, "Let's talk about happiness." And it startled me, because I hadn't been thinking about happiness. But why not? Why not concentrate on human happiness? Why not work for a world that works, for a living environment that recognizes that we are inhabitants of earth, and share this planet with one another? Why not place highest premium on the values the Dalai Lama identified as being eminently worthy of our trust: honesty, morality, compassion, and wisdom. He called it the dawning of a new world order.

I, as a grateful and loyal grandchild of Swedish emigrants, share their distrust of "grand world theories," or what others have called "the all-encompassing collective narratives." But I have also gained some insight from the Rev. Jesse Jackson who admonished me to "try to be on the side of history". What does it mean to be on history's side? Rev. Jackson said that when we look ahead, we know how things will have to turn out if humankind is to live on this earth properly. We cannot continue to destroy one another, he said. We cannot continue to have racial friction. We cannot continue to live in conflict with nature -- our nature, nature's nature, the world's nature. We cannot continue to live in a world where there is testing of nuclear weapons? No, at some point we will have to resolve these conflicts, dissolve these disharmonies, or we will surely destroy ourselves.

And when one looks into the teachings of the ones I would like to call the great religious masters -- the rabbis, Jesus of Nazareth, the Buddha, St. Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther King, Jr.,

the Dalai Lama, and hosts of others -- one finds there a real consensus. All of them praise human dignity. The one habit that everyone denounces consistently is self-righteousness: the attitude that we are right and everyone else is probably wrong. No one of them asked us to accept the correctness of an ideology in place of our duty and obligation to others. All point to the fundamentality of a wisdom of the ages, or, in the words of Vaclav Havel, that "there exists deep and fundamental experiences shared by the entire human race, and that traces of such experiences can be found in all cultures, regardless of how distant or how different they are from one another."

As an American I want to thank you people of Sweden for your steadfast contributions to the work of the United Nations, and I pray for the day