



United Nations

SECRETARY-  
GENERAL » STATEMENTS AND  
PRESS RELEASE  
MESSAGES

SG/SM/6541/REV.1\*

27 APRIL 1998

**SECRETARY-GENERAL STRESSES RELIGIOUS, SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF  
UNITED NATIONS WORK, IN KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

27 April 1998



**Press Release  
SG/SM/6541/Rev.1\***

**SECRETARY-GENERAL STRESSES RELIGIOUS, SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF UNITED NATIONS  
WORK, IN KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

19980427 Speaks on "Challenge of Diversity" at Event By Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding

Following is the text of the keynote address by Secretary-General Kofi Annan on "The Challenge of Diversity" for the Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Memorial Lecture, delivered this evening at the Park Avenue Synagogue, New York:

It is my distinct privilege to join you tonight in this renowned house of worship for this award ceremony and to share with you some of my thoughts. I am particularly gratified to be among many good friends, and to note that tonight's co-chairs, honorees and other distinguished guests are also strong supporters of the United Nations. Allow me to begin by acknowledging some of the people in this room:

-- The Honorable David Dinkins, former Mayor of this great city and a good friend;

-- His Eminence John Cardinal O'Connor, who has graced the United Nations time and again with his prayers for the success of our works, including my recent mission to Iraq;

-- Dan Rather of CBS and Edward Lewis of Essence Communications, who are helping the United Nations harness the democratizing power of knowledge and information for the benefit of the global public;

-- Omar Ashmawy, whose father, Seif Ashmawy, died earlier this year after a life dedicated to interreligious dialogue;

-- Father Ivo Markovic of Sarajevo, a city where the United Nations has spent many years, the distinguished winner of the Tanenbaum Center's first peace activist award, who has shown such courage and grace in promoting interreligious peace and cooperation under pressure;

\_-----\_ \* Reissued to reflect changes made at delivery.

-- Percy Sutton, a dynamic civic leader;

-- Liv Ullman, an actress with a social conscience and who uses her fame for the less fortunate;

-- And finally I turn to you, my good personal friend and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, who is one of the world's leading defenders of human rights: a voice for the voiceless in a world in which both silence and speaking out can entail great risk. It was only last month that Elie and I were in Geneva at the Commission on Human Rights, talking about human rights and the need to defend the rights of others.

It is not just any organization that could bring together such an eminent group. The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding has earned a global reputation for promoting tolerance and harmony among people of different faiths. The Center's namesake, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, was a remarkable individual: a leading Jewish ecumenical leader with a special concern for social justice and for refugees. Like Elie Wiesel today, Rabbi Tanenbaum fought for the rights and well-being of us all.

This Center continues that proud tradition of activism. I am grateful to Dr. Georgette Bennett, the Center's President, for continuing her late husband's life-work; to Richard A. Smith, who underwrites this Memorial Lecture on an annual basis; and to all others who have had a hand in granting me this opportunity to be part of your unique community this evening.

You may be wondering what a Secretary-General of the United Nations is doing in a synagogue, speaking about religion. You may think that the United Nations, an intergovernmental organization, must abide by the same separation between Church and State found in the United States and in many other countries. You may be trying to imagine how spirituality can coexist with the world of diplomacy, national security and hard-edged negotiations.

I would ask you to think differently; I would ask you to take another look. The United Nations is a tapestry, not only of suits and saris but of clerics' collars, nuns' habits and lamas' robes; of mitres,

skullcaps and yarmulkes.

I meet regularly with inter-faith groups and religious figures of many creeds.

His Holiness Pope John Paul II is one of the many religious leaders who have made memorable visits to the United Nations, in his case in 1995 during the fiftieth anniversary year of the United Nations. "The politics of nations", he said on that occasion, "can never ignore the transcendent, spiritual dimension of the human experience".

- 3 - SG/SM/6541/Rev.1 27 April 1998

That is a message I take to heart. There is a basic affinity between the teachings of the great religions of the world and the values enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations.

I am not alone in this belief. My predecessor Dag Hammarskjöld, who is remembered as much for his faith as for his achievements as Secretary-General, carried two documents with him wherever he travelled: a New Testament and a United Nations Charter: his two Bibles, if you will.

Consider some of the Ten Commandments set forth in the Old Testament book of Exodus: thou shalt not murder; thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour. Consider the Hindu principle of dharma: live righteously, do your duty. Consider that one of the five pillars of Islam is alms-giving. Or that Buddhism's path involves avoiding ill will and hurt to living things.

Now consider a few words from the United Nations Charter: "We the peoples of the United Nations, determined ... to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small".

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is also deeply rooted in the history of humankind: from the sayings of Confucius to Sa'adi, the thirteenth century Persian poet, to Thomas Jefferson.

Religions may manifest themselves in widely different practices and belief systems; the United Nations may display the outward signs of secular pursuits; but at heart we are dealing in universal values. That is what the United Nations is good at. To be kind, to be merciful: no single religion can claim a monopoly on such teachings. The problem, as I see it, is not with the faith; it is with the faithful.

"Wars begin in the minds of men", says another famous Charter, that of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); and so "it is in the minds of men that

the defences of peace must be constructed".

From war to discrimination and other violations of human rights, what we see all too frequently is a lack of tolerance and understanding between religious traditions. There is a tendency to think of "us" and "them". People fear what is different, and demonize the "other". As the Italian-Jewish writer and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi once wrote:

"Many people -- many nations -- can find themselves holding, more or less wittingly, that 'every stranger is an enemy'. For the most part this conviction lies deep down like some latent infection; it betrays itself only in random, disconnected acts, and does not lie at the base

- 4 - SG/SM/6541/Rev.1 27 April 1998

of a system of reason. But when this does come about, when the unspoken dogma becomes the major premise in a syllogism, then, at the end of the chain, there is the Laager [the armed camps]."

Some say this is human nature. So-called realist political theories are built on this assumption. Others cite poverty and economic despair; or the insecurities engendered by fundamental change, such as the end of the cold war; or globalization, which can undermine indigenous cultural and religious values.

Whatever role these factors play, in the end I believe that conflict and hatred, while common, are not inevitable. People choose to hate. People are taught to be cruel to others.

Religion, sadly, has been misused throughout history in the cause of division, discrimination and even death. From antiquity through the Crusades to the present day, religion has been distorted, turned from a personal matter of faith and sustenance into a weapon of power and coercion. The cry of the soul for meaning, and for God, has been drowned out by the battle cry of those claiming to have God on their side.

Around the world, identity politics based on religion, ethnicity and other characteristics have intensified in recent years within and among countries.

In Afghanistan, the edicts of the Taliban afflict the whole of society, but particularly women, through restrictions on their education and employment. In Uganda, a group calling itself the Lord's Resistance Army conducts an insurrection including the kidnapping of children, the rape of little girls and the murder of women, all in the name of their Messiah. In Northern Ireland, we are only now seeing good news after decades of sectarian strife.

In my own experience there have been no more heartbreaking sights in recent years than those of the minarets of grand mosques in Bosnia and Herzegovina laying in pieces on the ground, and of Muslims incarcerated behind razorwire in camps and subjected to violence the likes of which we had sworn should never happen again.

Intolerance need not lead to overt violence or outright conflict to leave scars. Insidious discrimination inflicts its own brand of harm. Religious minorities, for example, are often denied citizenship or banned from practicing their religion. Textbooks fail to reflect the diversity of a given society, or worse, preach a message of intolerance towards some religions.

- 5 - SG/SM/6541/Rev.1 27 April 1998

It is important to remember that intolerance and extremism can occur not only between religions but within a religion. I am thinking of the schism between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, and of the debate within Judaism over "who is a Jew". I think you will agree that family quarrels can sometimes be among the most painful and divisive.

So we have our work cut out for us. How can we fight discrimination? How can we promote diversity? How can we transcend, and ensure that faith becomes an enlightening and unifying reality? Let us remember what Elie Wiesel once told me: "Faith elicits respect, and fanaticism provokes hate".

The work of the United Nations starts with setting norms and standards for international behaviour. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims that "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion". The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights makes this right legally binding for the 140 countries who are party to that instrument. A Declaration adopted by the General Assembly in 1981 fleshes out still further the nature and meaning of this most basic freedom.

As valuable as these instruments are, they are but laws on the books. The situation on the ground is such that the Commission on Human Rights, with the encouragement and support of the United States Government, decided in 1986 to appoint an independent special rapporteur to examine incidents and governmental action in all parts of the world inconsistent with the provisions of the 1981 Declaration.

Through visits to countries and other information-gathering, the rapporteur documents violations and trends. He stresses the need not simply to control discrimination but to prevent it through interfaith dialogue and, in particular, education.

In a related realm, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague is doing its part to prosecute allegations of genocide and crimes against humanity -- crimes

sometimes committed in the name of religion. But we can go further still. Less than two months from now, delegates will gather in Rome for the culmination of negotiations on the establishment of an international criminal court. This fiftieth anniversary year of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Genocide Convention is a fitting occasion on which to create such a court, which has been called the missing link in the international legal system.

But even these are only the first steps, and are not always effective. The international community needs new and innovative tools. There is ample room for religious figures and organizations such as the Tanenbaum Center to be an even bigger part of this work than they already are.

- 6 - SG/SM/6541/Rev.1 27 April 1998

You can, for example, participate in world conferences and other United Nations forums. I would like to draw your attention to two upcoming events. First, in June, the General Assembly will convene a special session on illegal drugs, a global scourge that targets young people in particular. Surely religious groups and congregations have a special bond with -- and responsibility to -- the youth of the world.

Second, I have proposed that the General Assembly convene a millennium Assembly not merely to commemorate the year 2000 but to articulate a vision for the United Nations in the new century. I have also suggested that a non- governmental millennium forum be held in conjunction with the millennium Assembly, in recognition of civil society's role and rightful place in the world today.

Religious groups can also form interfaith groups for dialogue, and carry out advocacy and public education campaigns. You might also offer your good offices. For example, the Community of Sant'Egidio, a Roman Catholic lay organization dedicated to social concerns and with ties to a Mozambican priest, was instrumental in nurturing the successful negotiations that brought peace to Mozambique. Today, Sant'Egidio is doing invaluable work with regard to the situation in Kosovo.

I know the Tanenbaum Center has a particular interest in seeing religion used as a means of statecraft, and I applaud the programme on religion and conflict resolution that you are undertaking with Columbia University towards this end.

A culture of diversity can be ours. Just as the pen is mightier than the sword, so too are appeals to values -- religious values, United Nations Charter values -- more forceful than any call to arms.

We must stress what we have in common: the universality of human aspirations and human

rights. Just as important, we must have the courage of these convictions.

Last month I had the privilege of visiting Israel and the Middle East. During my visit to Yad Vashem I laid a wreath at the memorial for victims and paused for reflection in front of the tree planted in memory of my wife's uncle, Raoul Wallenberg.

Raoul took extraordinary risks. He was unafraid of the brutal and inhuman force that killed millions of people and destroyed Europe. The Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara was also heroic in saving lives during that awful time.

- 7 - SG/SM/6541/Rev.1 27 April 1998

But why did so many people turn the other way? Why were there so few Raoul Wallenbergs? Why does evil seem so plain, and goodness so mysterious? We must heed the unforgettable warning of the German theologian Martin Niemoeller. Elie Wiesel talked about praying for the dead and for the millions who were killed in Cambodia. Niemoeller reminds us what we must do for the living, before they get into trouble.

"In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up."

I have come tonight to speak up: for diversity. And I have come to speak up for the religious and spiritual dimension of our work at the United Nations.

I said upon my return from Iraq that we should never underestimate the power of prayer. When we speak up, when we pray, individually and collectively, with one voice or with a multitude of voices, we can overwhelm the sounds of war. If we can overcome the seeds of intolerance, we can forge the peace and justice that is the birthright of every human being.

For your enlightened leadership in this vital endeavour, I say thank you.

\* \* \* \* \*



**For information media. Not an official record.**