

"Faith Reflections on the United Nations"

An edited version of the address given at St. Mark's Unitarian Church, Edinburgh, on Sunday September 24 for the special service marking UN International Peace Day and Peacekeeping Sunday, by REV. BRIAN COOPER, Churches and Inter-Faith Secretary, Uniting for Peace.

Background: Christian and Secular Idealism at end of World War Two:

1945-46 saw widespread RELIGIOUS REVIVAL in the two victorious Western allies in the wartime coalition, USA & Britain. In USA young Billy Graham was preaching to many thousands at the Youth for Christ rallies sweeping America. Across UK, church services were packed. In London, people formed long queues at City Temple to hear Dr. Lesley Wetherhead expound Christianity with latest scientific and psychological knowledge; at same time, Dr. Donald Soper, Methodist orator for Christian Socialism, spoke to crowds in Hyde Park and on Tower Hill. In Scotland, radical Kirk minister George MacLeod was re-starting the rebuilding of Iona Abbey and gathering the Iona Community. Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple was setting out Christian principles for shaping post-war Britain in socially just terms. This Christian idealism joined the wave of Socialist idealism that led to the historic Labour victory of 1945, and the practical Liberal idealism of William Beveridge and blueprints of welfare state in UK [and that inspired by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in USA], to create a public mood of optimism, hope and "let's build a new and better world on the ruins of the old".

Amid this mood of high, determined optimism the United Nations was launched in 1945 - the Charter at San Francisco - *and the first meeting of UN General Assembly was held in London January 1946 at Central*

Hall, Westminster, centre of British & world Methodism. So at outset there were fascinating connections between Xpian faith and UN. Yet, of course, UN was founded as a secular international institution - its Charter is couched in Enlightenment rationalism and progressive secular idealism. It was not against religion ; from outset it upheld universal right of religious freedom - but in 1945 and much of 20th century, religion was not to the fore in global political discourse; religious factors did not drive political issues; UN embraced all world's peoples, of all faiths and none; Islam was not a global force then. The dominant ideologies - liberalism, capitalism, social democracy, Communism - were all secular. [By a curious twist, officially atheist Soviet Union gave a statue of Micah's Man Beating a Sword into a Plough, to UN Building in New York]. Yet VATICAN is a member state; as UN structures developed, global faith bodies alongside other NGOs came to be in UN system as members of ECOSOC [Economic & Social Council], eg. Pax Christi, Baptist World Alliance, World Methodist Council, World Conference of Religions for Peace. Importantly, the UN DECLARATION ON HUMAN RIGHTS affirms: "no human being may be persecuted or discriminated against on the basis of religion" - a human right very widely denied today, eg. the oppression of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, forced to flee to Bangladesh.

Religion and the Global Agenda

For much of 20th century, religion - and its misuse - did not feature explicitly in UN concerns. In recent decades this situation has greatly changed, as *faith-related factors have increasingly come to the fore in world affairs:*

: The 1979 Muslim fundamentalist revolution in IRAN was a transformative event. The Iranian leaders saw the world in theological even apocalyptic terms, looking towards a world purged of evil by a pure Islam overcoming the materialistic 'Satan's' of USA and USSR.

: 1980s & 1990s conflicts in Middle East, Caucasus, Balkans, clearly had a

religious dimension, with sectarianism misused for political ends and religion defining identity and community.

: In USA, Christian fundamentalists [the 'Religious Right'] influenced state policy of Republican presidents eg. support for Iraq War.

: Especially post-9/11 [2001], *the world could no longer be understood in purely secular terms as radical Islam [Al-Qaeda, later ISIS] was now a major force to be reckoned with by secular Western governments.*

Faith-based Opinion Must Applaud UN Achievements:

Lord Malloch Brown, British former deputy UN Secretary-General, in a Newsnight programme marking UN Peace Day, rather surprisingly described UN's positive achievements as "the work of God". This could mean 'inspired by God' or 'approved by God' - or both. Certainly faith-based opinion must applaud and support what this essentially secular institution has achieved: eg-

:: UN has huge *humanitarian achievements* to its credit. eg: UN World Food Programme feeds an average of some 104 million people in some 80 countries each year.

:: **UN High Commission for Refugees currently looks after 60 million refugees worldwide [1 in 122 people in the world today are refugees].**

:: **UN Development programmes through its various agencies bring hope to millions. I have vivid recollections of visiting UN programmes for poor people in Sri Lanka, and recall children dancing with delight around a standing tap gushing out fresh, clean water: they were set free from having to use muddy, infected water from a nearby stream.**

:: UN Peacekeeping prevents conflict and enables peace processes from Cyprus and Golan Heights to **Kashmir** and some African states.

:: The Paris Climate Change Accord gives humanity hope of averting dangerous global warming.

The UN Assmbly in New York this week affirmed its positive achievements but recognised such still fall short of its lofty founding ideals: eg.failures to solve Israel/Palestine dispute, to prevent 2003 Iraq War, to stop the Syrian Civil War. But UN can only achieve what its member states will it to achieve, and solving disputes always requires patient dialogue,never intemperate and threatening language.

UN Recognises Importance of Inter-Faith Dialogue

The famous statement by the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Kung - "There can be no world peace without peace between the world's religions" - is a constant challenge to people of all faiths to work for the harmony of the world's faiths for the benefit of world peace. The new global context in which religion - or its misuse - is a powerful driver in some disputes and conflicts has caused the UN to take seriously the promotion of inter-faith harmony.

October 20 2010 saw the UN General Assembly unanimously pass Resolution A/65/5,declaring the first full week of each February as 'World Interfaith Harmony Week'. Proposed by King Abdullah II of Jordan, this resolution has for its inclusive yet essentially spiritual basis "Love of God and the Neighbour and Love of Good and the Neighbour." It "encourages all States to support, on a voluntary basis, the spread of the message of interfaith harmony and goodwill in the world's churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and other places of worship during the first week of February."

Ban Ki-Moon, then UN Secretary-General, said the resolution and special week had "unique historical and unprecedented potential to promote the healing of interfaith tensions in the world (which) themselves constitute one of the world's greatest challenges.....At a time when the world is faced with many simultaneous problems - security, environmental, humanitarian and economic - enhanced tolerance and understanding are fundamental for a resilient and vibrant international society. There is an imperative need to further reaffirm and develop harmonious cooperation between the world's different faiths and religions." [20.1.2011].

February 2011 saw the first World Interfaith Harmony Week. It was endorsed, among various bodies, by the World Council of Churches, whose General Secretary, Dr. Olav Tveit, urged member churches' support and held Christian-Muslim consultations.

Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, personal representative of the King of Jordan, and Tony Blair, UK ex-Prime Minister, co-sponsors of the resolution, declared it "unique in the annals of the UN because of its explicit mention of God (albeit in a way that does not exclude those who don't subscribe to a religion), and because it promotes harmonious interfaith relations in a way that specifically draws attention to the scriptural and theological basis for such relations... This resolution does encourage people who believe in inter-religious harmony and mutual acceptance to challenge those whose narrow and often ignorant view of other religions leads to discord and division." *The Guardian* - not always sympathetic to religion - wrote ('For the Love of the Good' - 13.1.2011) the special week had "an unprecedented potential to globally turn the tide against religious tensions by: uniting the efforts of all the inter-faith groups doing positive work within one focused theme, thereby increasing their collective momentum; harnessing the collective might of the world's second-largest infrastructure (that of places of worship) specifically for peace and harmony; and permanently and regularly encouraging the silent majority of preachers to publicly declare themselves for peace and harmony and providing a ready-made vehicle for them to do so." "A good deed for interfaith harmony..... counts by creating a ripple effect of goodness that has unforeseen positive consequences in the future in an ever-widening circle of goodness."

It is unclear how far the lofty aims and great potential of the World Interfaith Harmony Week are in process of being realised. Where interfaith work is already well established, it may in practice be difficult to add another special week. But where little interfaith work is undertaken the UN-promoted week offers a model for such cooperation, and thus stimulate more ongoing interfaith work. It challenges faith communities worldwide to cooperate locally and nationally to affirm common commitment to promoting peace and harmony. Most significantly, it marks recognition and support for interfaith harmony at the

highest level of the global community. Imaginative action by faith communities is required for the week to achieve its potential.

Towards a 'Spiritual Council' within UN Structures:

With the world afflicted by the misuse of religion for ideological and power struggles, is it time for UN to try to enlist the positive potential of the world faiths to help solve global problems? Should there be a formalised involvement of world religions, their leaders and representatives, in the UN system (other than faith-based NGOs in ECOSOC)? This idea has been mooted over the years. In 1943, prior to UN being set up, Bishop Bell of Chichester, a leading Anglican and committed internationalist, with the support of the World Congress of Faiths, suggested the League of Nations' successor should have a religious element. Post-1945, various global faith bodies eg. World Conference of Religions for Peace, have raised the idea of liaison with UN.

The core of the argument in favour of a 'Spiritual Council' linked to the UN has always been that the UN's peace-building purposes demand the primacy of moral and ethical motivations, and that religious leaders could help articulate and advance such motivations for the cause of world peace. Since humanity's great religious traditions are the primary source of ethics and moral values - albeit in modern times secular philosophies also provide these - it would seem wholly appropriate for their representatives to be involved in the world's supreme forum. In recent years, the religious dimension to a number of conflicts, and the difficulty experienced by secular politicians in understanding and dealing with such faith-based factors and forces, have made even more relevant the concept of a 'religious/spiritual council' within, or in some way linked to, the UN. The aim, in essence, is that a body of religious leaders should be a 'spiritual chamber' of the UN to give moral and spiritual guidance to politicians.

Practical challenges certainly need to be overcome before such a council could be set up. For example: which faiths would be represented, who would be the members, how would they be chosen? One can envisage such a body including the Dalai Lama, leading Hindu, Jewish and Muslim figures, Archbishop of

Canterbury, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches and similar faith leaders. Promising UN initiatives have already taken place, eg. 2007, 2008: High-Level Dialogues on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace in the General Assembly; UN NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns' events. Faith bodies lobbying for setting up of the interfaith council at UN include World Congress of Faiths and Universal Peace Federation, the interfaith body of Unification Church, which urges cooperation of religious and political leaders to unite wisdom and practical experience, and local and national structures to support the global efforts.

In view of the widespread misuse of religion for sectarian conflict and community division in many parts of the world today, the idea of an interfaith 'Spiritual Council' deserves the widest possible support.

UN: Challenge to People of Faith:

Finally, what of ourselves - as individuals and faith communities? How do we relate to all this information and reflection about the UN? Is it just of general interest - or can we connect with it? Of course, we can connect *financially*, by supporting those UN humanitarian agencies to which the general public can donate - UNICEF [UN International Children's Emergency Fund], UNHCR [UN High Commission for Refugees]. We can also connect *politically*, by making representations personally or as faith communities or peace organisations, on specific issues, through MPs to HM Government to UN, or directly to the Secretary-General. Such are likely to carry weight if showing *well informed* concern. As people of faith, we must supremely connect *spiritually*, by being part of global support for inter-faith harmony and engaging in inter-faith activities as individuals and communities in our localities. We are already part of Edinburgh's well developed inter-faith work - but there is much more to be done.

All this raises *deeper questions*. What does it mean *in practice* to see ourselves as members of the brotherhood and sisterhood of all humanity? What does it mean *in practice* to define ourselves as part of the global fellowship of the spiritually aware and committed, seeking that deeper unity amid great diversity?

Globalisation and the Communications Revolution are now imposing a secular, impersonal unity on the world community: but unless we create *spiritual unity*, the result will be dangerously soulless. If today's UN-focused Peace Sunday helps us reflect on the UN's role and work, and on these deeper issues, it will have been worthwhile.

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