

# The Spiritual History of the United Nations

## A Brief Overview of the Spiritual History of the United Nations

“Unless there is spiritual renaissance, the world will know no peace.” Dag Hammarskjöld the 2<sup>nd</sup> Secretary-General

The United Nations was built on spiritual principles and universal values such as peace, human rights, human dignity, human worth, justice, respect, good neighbourliness and freedom. Many of the key founders of the UN and those in leadership positions there today also use spirituality and values as a guiding force.

The Dumbarton Oaks Conference, which took place in San Francisco in December 1944, began to address the formation of a United Nations Charter. The key countries that were addressing the UN Charter listed 12 major functions of the UN. One of these functions was to be the seeker of freedom. And, in defining this term, it said that for humans to attain ultimate freedom the UN not only had to promote material growth but also spiritual growth. This spiritual consciousness was behind the formation of the UN and on October 24, 1945 the UN Charter was officially recognized and the United Nations came into being. The Preamble of the Charter of the United Nations begins “We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to affirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.”

According to the paper “Spirituality at the United Nations”, by Donald Keys, in the early 1950’s the Laymen’s Movement worked successfully to assure that there would be a moment of silence at the beginning and closing of each General Assembly Session. They also worked hard to create one room at UN headquarters for silent reflection. This room was open on October 14, 1952. In 1956 Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld with the cooperation of the Laymen’s Movement set out to redesign the room. In November 1957 the transformed meditation room reopened to create an atmosphere of stillness by placing a six and a half ton block of crystalline block of iron ore from a Swedish mine in the middle of the room with a beam of light striking from an unseen source on the stone, a symbol of the transcendent light of the skies gives life to the earth on which we stand—a symbol, according to Mr. Hammarskjöld, of how the light of the spirit gives life to matter. Dag Hammarskjöld also said, “the Uncarved Block” — which remains at the Center, “is yours and that of all humanity.” He said in 1956:

“The Meditation Room is a kind of stepchild of the architects of this house: it was brought into being as an experiment, but now I am happy to confirm that it is a permanent part of the building and I am sure it will be of increasingly importance. We have a very small space within which we sought to achieve a room of stillness. This house must have one room, one place, which is dedicated to Silence, dedicated to silence in the outer sense and stillness in the inner sense. We must do everything possible in creating such a room to create an atmosphere where people could really withdraw into themselves and feel the void.

We had one difficulty, that in a room of this kind in a house of this character we could not use any kind of symbols with which man has been used to link his religious feeling; we had to work on the basis of symbols common to all. In a sense, what I think we had at the back of our minds was something which is said, I believe, in one of Buddha’s scripts—that the significance of the vessel is not the shell but the void. The significance of a room is not the walls but is in what is framed by the walls; that is to say, we had to create a room of stillness with perhaps one or two very simple symbols, light and light striking on stone. It is for that reason that in the center of the Room there is this block of iron ore, glistening like ice in a shaft of light from above. That is the only symbol in the Room— a meeting of light of sky and the earth.

However, in a certain sense the symbolism goes one step further. I do not know whether there is anything quite like the arrangement of that Room with a big block of stone in the center. The original idea was one which I think you will all recognize; you will find it in many great religions; it is the empty altar, empty not because there is no God, but empty because God is worshipped in so many forms. The stone in the center is the altar to the God of all. At the same time, at least to myself it had strong associations with the cornerstone, the firm element in a world of movement and turmoil. In this house, with its dynamic modern architecture, there are a very few things that give you the feeling of weight, solidity and permanence; in this case we wanted this massive altar to give the impression of something more than temporary.

We also had another idea which comes down to what, after all, we are trying to do here in this house—we are trying to turn swords into ploughshares; and we thought we could bless by our thoughts the very material out of which arms are made. For that reason we felt that it was appropriate that the material to represent the earth on which we stand, as seen by the light of the sky, should be iron ore, the material out of which swords have been made and out of which homes are built. It is a material, which represents the very paradox of human life; the basic materials offered by God to us may be used either for construction or destruction. This leads our thoughts to the necessity of choice between the two alternatives.

You see therefore, that in the seeming void of the Room there is something we want to say. We want to bring back the stillness, which we have lost in our streets and in our conference rooms, and to bring it back in a setting in which no noise would impinge upon our imagination. In that setting we want to bring back our thoughts to elementary facts, the facts we are always facing, life struck by light while resting on the ground. We want to bring back the idea of worship, devotion to something which is greater and higher than we are ourselves. We want to do that by the form of our altar in such a way as to bring to everybody's mind the fact that every single one of us is faced, in his handling of the heritage of the riches of this earth, with the choice between the ploughshare and the sword.

This room has a very powerful and sacred energy. A dynamite bomb was placed in the Meditation Room once and the fuse went out.

U Thant the third Secretary-General was also quite a spiritual man; he once wrote that he was greatly influenced by the writings of Albert Schweitzer and his concept of "reverence for life", and by those of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. In stating his own concept of human society, he states:

"I am always conscious of the fact that I am a member of the human race... This consciousness prompts me to work for a great human synthesis, which is the implicit goal of the world Organization I had the privilege of serving... Long before I was appointed Secretary-General, I use to dwell at some length on the oneness of the human community."

Eleanor Roosevelt the first High Commissioner for Human Rights at the United Nations also greatly supported universal values and equality in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that:

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

In addressing a gathering of Religious and Spiritual Leaders in 2000, the current Secretary General, Kofi Annan, stated several times the importance of the spiritual. He said that "for many of us, the axiom could well be. 'We pray, therefore, we are'". He also said that "at the heart, we are dealing with universal values. To be merciful, to be tolerant, to love thy neighbor..." And he added: "there is no mystery here. Such values are deeply ingrained in the human spirit itself. It is little wonder that the same values animate the Charter of the United Nations, and lie at the root of our search for world peace."

During the celebration in commemoration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Secretary General, Kofi Annan, referring to Dr. King's many contributions, he quoted Dr. King: "This says to us that our world is geographically one. Now, we are faced with making it spiritually one. Through our scientific genius we have made of the world a neighborhood; now through moral and spiritual genius, we must make it a brotherhood."

There are many efforts and groups that aim to bring more purposely the spiritual and values dimension into the UN:

Values Caucus (NY) started in 1994 when a group of NGOs convinced of the basic need to consider values in global affairs gathered at the first Preparatory Conference for the World Summit on Social Development (UNWSSD). The Values Caucus took its inspiration from a "Seminar on Ethical and Spiritual Dimensions of Social Progress" which was held in October 1994 as a part of the preparation for the UNWSSD held in Denmark in March 1995. The goal of the Values Caucus is to raise awareness of the need to examine the values guiding human behavior at all levels.

#### Towards the Creation of a Permanent Spiritual Forum for World Peace at the United Nations

There has been a series of ongoing meetings at the UN and beyond to discuss a proposal initiated by T.Y.S. Lama Gangchen to create a Permanent Spiritual Forum for World Peace at the UN. Such a body is intended to provide a neutral and democratic permanent space at the global public level for spiritual bodies and individuals who are willing to join forces with the UN to confront global challenges and to create peace together. This proposal that was first presented at ECLAC (the Latin American Headquarters of the United Nations Economic Commission) on June 8, 1995 in Santiago, Chile and has been distributed and discussed worldwide.

The Spiritual Caucus in New York began in November 2000. Its aim is to support the spiritual principles and purposes of the United Nations and seeks to balance and strengthen the endeavors of the UN system and its affiliates with inner reflection and stillness. The members meet regularly at UN Headquarters in NY to spend time together in silent reflection, share insights and explore ways of using inner focus in service to the work of the UN. Anyone interested in supporting the UN in this way is welcome to join. It meets every first and third Thursday of the month.

"Meditation is a process that cleanses the mind of impurities. It cultivates such qualities as concentration, awareness, intelligence and tranquility, leading finally to the attainment of the highest wisdom." U Thant, Secretary-General of the United Nations, 1961 -1971

On 24 October 2001 a group at the UN in Geneva set up the Spiritual Caucus for the purpose of adding a spiritual and ethical component to the United Nations' work. Members of this group helped to create the NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns, a committee of the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations. On 24 October 2002 Member Organisations in Geneva with consultative status with ECOSOC in Geneva applied to CONGO for it to be made a standing Committee of CONGO. The application was supported by the regulatory number of over twenty Member Organisations which submitted it to the CONGO Board at its Meeting in Vienna on 30-31 October 2002, where it was discussed and adopted. Since this Committee has been officially adopted, NGOs in consultative relationship with United Nations that wish to join are welcome. Following a few months of work and discussions with NGOs based in New York, a proposal to have a NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns at the United Nations in New York was supported by almost 70 NGOs in consultative relationship with the United Nations and was submitted to the CONGO Board at its Meeting in New York on 26-27 February 2004. This proposal was discussed and adopted.

There are many other groups that are supporting the spiritual and values dimension at the United Nations. The Aquarian Age Community has held several public meetings at the United Nations since the Spring of 1999, sends out a monthly e-letter on the spiritual work of the United Nations and holds monthly meditation meetings on the Spiritual Work of the United Nations and the Liberation of Humanity. This group has also dedicated a section of their website to the Spiritual Foundations of the United Nations. There is Mediation Group at the UN in Geneva that has been meeting for almost 30 years. Sri Chinmoy has lead meditations every week at the UN for many years. The United Nations Staff and Recreation Club has a number of spiritually minded groups like the Society for Enlightenment and Transformation, the Feng Shui Club and the Friendship Club. Civil Society is also promoting interfaith cooperation through UN committees such as Committee of Religious NGOs & the United Religions Initiative UN Cooperation Circle which helps to find common ground among the religions community. There is also a NGO Committee on the Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples that helps promote indigenous causes and brings the indigenous wisdom and traditions into the work of the UN. Recently there has been the creation of Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues that closely works with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

At the Spirit of the United Nations on October 27, 2005 an event in honor of the 60 th Anniversary of the United Nations and the 100 th Anniversary of the birth of Dag Hammarskjöld and organized by the NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns NY and its special project the Spiritual Council for Global Challenges and the Values Caucus and in cooperation with the UN Department of Public Information and the UN Staff and Recreation Council and with numerous supporting organizations and in front of approximately 700 members of the UN community, the President of the 60 th General Assembly spoke of the essential role of spirituality and values at forefront of the United Nations. From the founding of the United Nations until the present time spirituality and values has played a key role in solving global challenges by using a foundation of universal values and transcending the boundaries of religion, ethnicity, gender and geography to build a culture where we, the peoples of the world, can address together our common global concerns in a holistic, positive and transforming way and "live together in peace with one another" — thus realizing the core objectives and universal principles stated in the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.