

Religion and the United Nations

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In the recent United Nations Week, religious services in Catholic churches constituted a part of the program. This was very appropriate because the United Nations are fundamentally a religious movement.

This may seem a strange statement to those familiar with the work of the United Nations. Certainly the men who are most active in them do not consider religion of any consequence at all. And yet it is in their own statements that we discover this religious basis.

The United Nations have drawn up and adopted a DECLARATION OF UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS. In that declaration we are told: "Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world;" that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights..." This is the most fundamental principle of the United Nations and this principle is religious. It is true that the word "God" is not here, but to anyone who knows the history of our civilization the Declaration is eloquent throughout with the thought of God... This Declaration is an echo of the constant Christian tradition regarding the dignity of man. Men are so used to this idea—at least as an idea—that they take for granted that this concept has always been found wherever man has been found. And even the esteemed representatives at the United Nations, are, without recognizing it, by force of racial habit, using language and employing concepts that are Christian, theologically, philosophically, and historically.

The concept of the dignity of man is one of the many treasures received from Christ. In a pre-Christian world, even in a Greek and Roman world, and much more so elsewhere, might was right. There were a few philosophers who escaped this universal error, but their voice was a whisper in the overwhelming roar of oppression, slavery and hate. But with Christ

things became different. All men, every man, was held precious. This was basic in His teachings. Slave and poor were immediately admitted on equal footing with ruler and rich. St. Paul summed up this Christian position in his letter to the Colossians (3, 11) when he described Christ's following: "Where there is neither Gentile nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian nor Scythian, bond nor free. But Christ is all and in all."

And this teaching of Christ concerning the worth of the individual as a man, His Church maintained through century after century, opposing the power of tyrants, the deepest lusts of the human heart, the fierce resistance of cruelty, greed, pride. The battle was not always a victory, but the IDEA never died.

Joseph Leighton, Professor of Philosophy at Ohio State University declares that the Medieval Church aimed to put morality and refinement into the world and to a large degree succeeded by "infusing it with the sense of the inalienable worth of the human soul." And by infusing it with this spirit the Church infused that same world with the spirit that in our times has given birth to the United Nations.

And Professor Arthur Hadley of Yale University says: "Not only was the Church of the Middle ages the most democratic institution of Europe, but the ideals of the Church had taught men to exercise the sort of liberty which makes democracy possible." And the sort of liberty that made the United Nations possible.

And it was this spirit which the scholastic philosophers analyzed and proposed as a system of political science, and which was taken over and incorporated into the constitutions of our modern democracies. Thus it is that Walter Lippman the political Philosopher says:

"The liberties we talk about defending today were established by men who took their conception of man from the great central tradition of Western civilization, and the liberties we inherit can almost certainly not survive the abandonment of that tradition." And what is this conception of man, and what is this great central tradition of Western Civilization? This concept is the Catholic concept that man was singled out among the creatures of God and given a unique dignity, that he is the possessor of inalienable rights and is bound by corresponding obligations before the tribunal of his own conscience which is the voice of God. And the central tradition which was the vehicle of this concept was Catholicity.

The United Nations are not conceived primarily to keep armies idle, food cheap, money safe, men housed, life secure and pleasant. Those purposes are good and desirable, but they are secondary. The United Nations, as they themselves insist in their Declaration of Human Rights, have for a

task to create a world in which men will live in a manner worthy of their high dignity. This means, of course, creating material conditions in which such a life is possible, but it means first of all recognizing the dignity itself.

And therefore the appropriateness of a United Nations celebration in a Church, before the altar of God. For the dignity of man is precisely in this, that he possesses a peculiar, a unique relation to God.

If the purpose of the United Nations Week was to arouse the interest of all the citizens of the world, then most appropriately authorities undertook to do this in a Catholic Church. There, if any place, men will recall the bond of unity by which human beings throughout the world are members of a great family, because children of the same God, endowed by Him with the same rights and obligations, all brothers in Jesus Christ.

And in a Catholic Church, if anywhere, men will remember that the United Nations in their preoccupation with the oppressed are but voicing Christ's love and respect for the individual, and have received inspiration from Him, though perhaps unaware of the impulse.

Only one thing is regrettable, that the United Nations, which in so many things are carrying on work begun by Christ and under the inspiration of principles established by Christ, have no place in their deliberations for the person of Christ.

The United Nations have gone a long way. They will succeed only if they go all the way. St. Paul, as mentioned above, described the Christian life as one: "where there is neither Gentile nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian nor Scythian, bond nor free. But Christ is all and in all."

The United Nations have accepted part of that definition by espousing the equal dignity of men, of all men, "nor Gentile nor Jew" "nor bond nor free." It only remains for them to accept the rest: all men equal in dignity, in rights, in peace because "Christ is all and in all."



TOO BUSY

He worked so hard before the feast
The Christmas profits reaping,
He had no time to think of Christ
And spent the feast day sleeping.

L. M. H.