



## What More can Europe do to Improve Human Rights - UPF Europe President

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*"What more can Europe do to improve Human Rights"*

Address of Dr Yong Cheon Song, Chair, Universal Peace Federation, Europe



Distinguished guests, Ambassadors for Peace, Ladies & Gentlemen! As Chair of Universal Peace Federation in Europe, it is truly an honour and a privilege to be able to extend a warm welcome to you all to the European Economic and Social Committee here in Brussels and to our European Leadership Conference on the theme *"What more can Europe do to improve Human Rights?"*

I am deeply grateful to you all for taking time out of your busy schedules to be with us here this morning and to the E.E.S.C. for acting as co-hosts of this conference and for welcoming us here to their magnificent building!

Our conference is being held as part of the programme of events being convened all around the world to mark U.N. Human Rights Day 2012 on December 10th which, as you know, commemorates the signing 64 years ago - on December 10th 1948 - of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The institution of the first 'Human Rights Day' on December 10th 1950, means that this year's commemoration is actually the sixty third such occasion and the special theme that the U.N. has given for it this year is *"Celebrating human rights."*

Ladies and gentlemen, in order to do proper justice to the theme given by the U.N and our own theme, I think that we need to ask ourselves the very basic question *"what aspects of human rights are we really justified in celebrating and where must we do better?"*

There can of course be no denying that the value of the 'Universal Declaration' document itself and of all the detailed rights that it enshrines, is worth celebrating. It is, after all, the basis of most modern human rights thinking, legislation and practice and has been translated into 310 languages - the most translated document in human history!

Also, the advances in human rights now, compared with the situation immediately after World War 2, are really very considerable. It is not for nothing that the European Union has just won the Nobel Peace Prize for its success in maintaining the peace (and by implication safeguarding human rights) in Europe over the last 60 years. As Dr Walter Schwimmer, the former Secretary-General of the Council of Europe, states in his book "The European Dream", *"Europe, in spite of its many other problems, is still the most successful such peace project the world has ever had"*.

But how much should we really celebrate when, despite all the advances that the 'Universal Declaration' has encouraged, such terrible atrocities as the indiscriminate killing of over 40,000 people in Syria continue to this very day and the international community is powerless to intervene to prevent genocide?

The painful, but nevertheless somewhat encouraging truth, is that although so many things still happening today are indeed dark and truly disturbing, in the past conditions were really far worse and, for long periods of our history, human rights hardly existed at all. It is true that human history has been far more about “man’s inhumanity to man” than anything else. However, seen against the backdrop of that stark and tragic reality I think that we can see that things have indeed been improving bit by bit and that the ‘Universal Declaration’ is a great step forward in terms of human aspirations and that that is indeed something to celebrate.

However, I feel that it is important that we do not allow ourselves to be misled into seeing human rights as merely reacting to all the violations of one human being by another, great or small, as they arise. We need to understand how, in a positive and proactive sense, we should be treating each other so as to bring about interpersonal, family and societal harmony.

The only way to guarantee human rights for all is to ensure that all human beings live with the awareness that they exist for the sake of each other and that human rights violations are the result of living for oneself, of treating other human beings in a selfish way and taking advantage of them for one’s own benefit.

From his early childhood, UPF’s late Founder, Father Moon, who so sadly passed away three months ago, had a deep concern for human rights and a strong desire to right the many wrongs that he saw. He became aware, even as a child, that human life was filled with suffering and that much of it was inflicted by one human being on another. He began to search desperately for the root causes of such behaviour and this passion for human rights was only strengthened as a result of the almost unimaginable suffering he himself experienced as a victim of terrible human rights violations. These included being imprisoned 6 times in 3 different countries for crimes that he did not commit and being severely tortured during some of these incarcerations. In addition, he had to spend almost three years in a North Korean concentration camp where prisoners were literally worked to death and he only escaped due to the camp being overrun by liberating U.N. forces the night before his scheduled execution. What is more, many of his beloved family members were ruthlessly killed by the communist forces in North Korea under Kim Il Sung.



In the ideal world of peace that he began to envision in his heart, the eradication of human rights violations was of the highest priority. But he came to the conclusion that human rights violations could only ever be finally eliminated through each individual member of the human family connecting to God as the source of life and finding his or her own deep value, unique identity, sense of inner peace and capacity to love, in that way. He understood that the more deeply connected to the heart and love of God human beings were, the less likely they would be to hurt or abuse others.

He also realized that human rights violations would lead to unending ill feeling and would recur again and again unless their victims could learn to forgive those who abused them and let go of the past and he felt responsible to set an example in this respect. Not only did he forgive those who directly tortured him but he went to North Korea in 1991 and embraced the dictator Kim Il Sung who had been the key perpetrator of his own and his family’s suffering, like a long lost brother and with complete forgiveness in his heart. To this day that supreme act of forgiveness, which so deeply touched the heart and mind of Kim Il Sung continues to be the greatest bridge of peace that unites North and South Korea and gives hope of constructive dialogue about an end to the almost 60 year stand off between those 2 nations. But more than anything else it stands as a powerful example of the power of forgiveness and of selflessness to change

history in a better direction.

If Europe is to truly realize its capacity to become a society that embodies human rights, I believe that it will only do so by harnessing the value of religion to bring this about. I believe that it will need to significantly change its concept of human rights and what the role of human rights in relation to that of religion is, to do so.

Human rights have, to a great extent, become disconnected from the idea of God and the values of religion. I believe this has been a serious mistake and that it will be impossible to establish a truly, just harmonious, loving and inclusive society free from human rights violations without reconnecting the whole notion of human rights to God and to religion as they used to be.

Both the U.S. Declaration of Independence of 1776 and the French Declaration of Rights of 1789, which provide so many of the underpinnings of modern political thought, start from the fundamental premise that human rights are granted first and foremost by God rather than by man himself. The U.S. document speaks of citizens being “endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights”. The French Declaration proclaims that these “*natural, inalienable and sacred*” rights are given “*in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being*”

For the last 65 years or so, however, there has been a pronounced shift away from God-centered Human Rights. Thus the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights does not refer to God as such, although it is clear that many of its framers felt that it should do so and tried to ensure that it did. However, in the end they compromised by excluding the word God and insisting instead on at least including ideals and concepts having their roots in religious thought. Much more recently, a similar clash of ideas occurred over the wording of the proposed European Constitution and the word “God” was again excluded from the resultant document despite heavy lobbying from the Catholic Church and other mainline religious bodies.

I respectfully suggest that the time has come for human rights to once again be connected to God and religion and I believe that this would be the single most important step that could be taken to advance the human rights agenda in Europe and the rest of the world.

No other social institution requires the individual to search his or her conscience and examine how well or badly he may be treating his fellow human beings to the same extent as does religion.

Furthermore, no other social institution or body is nearly as clear about the supreme value of each individual human being as is religion. According to religious thought, each and every person that the believer may interact with is, like oneself, a child of God. As such, that person has Sacred Value and must be considered as having unique and divine value in front of God. Thus to love one’s neighbour or one’s brother or sister has the same value as loving God himself and to do so is a core requirement of all the world’s faith traditions. By the same token, to abuse another person in any way is to hurt God and to risk his wrath and disfavour.

For these reasons all major faiths enjoin their believers to follow the “Golden Rule” which requires that one treat others as one would wish to be treated oneself”.

Thus, it is clear that religion is one of, if not the main human rights educator in society and a force that must be harnessed by all those who wish to solve the rampant abuses that occur.

I do believe that it is meaningful and worthwhile for the U.N. to mark ‘Human Rights Day’ and that one day a year be set aside to remember the importance of universal values. However, in this context I think that we should remember that religion insists that believers keep their heart and conscience focused continuously every day on how they are treating others and whether they are centered on true love or not. Indeed, one could say, therefore, that “*in religion every day is Human Rights Day!*”

Thus, I think it is clear that no other social institution has such strict rules and incentives upholding the ideal of living for the sake of others and against violating the human rights of others as religion does. Consequently, to exclude or limit the impact of religion on human rights issues is to seriously weaken the forces in society that uphold human rights. That is why I believe that harnessing the power of religious thought is key to building a good society in which human rights are as safeguarded as they can possibly be.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is important that we do not merely react to all the violations of one human being by another, great or small, but that we come to understand how, in a positive and proactive sense, we should be relating to and treating each other and that we have a broad vision as to how human rights will be realised.

The only way to guarantee human rights for all will be to ensure that all human beings live with the

awareness that they exist for the sake of each other and that human rights violations are the result of living too much for oneself, of treating other human beings in a selfish way and taking advantage of them for one's own benefit.

Lastly in relation to the role of religion, UPF believes strongly that the wisdom and insight of religion exists to be drawn upon not merely by individuals but also by government. One key reason that Father Moon promoted an Inter-religious Council at the U.N. and interfaith work there generally, is so that the world's religions can help promote the cause of human rights around the world utilizing their truly global nature and unique insights about human rights based on their beliefs and lifestyle and deep sense of mission to help improve the quality of relationships within society.

I am happy to say that his initiative has, since the year 2000, been steadily gaining momentum and increasingly interfaith elements have been added to the U.N. culture backed by over 90 member nations who perhaps understand the value of interreligious and interfaith cooperation better than other nations do. Given that during the Cold War era religion was virtually a taboo subject at The U.N. due to Soviet lead opposition to it, such progress in drawing on the wisdom of religion is indeed heartening. I feel the time is coming when the EU institutions too should be thinking about how to utilize the range of religions in their midst to solve problems they are confronting, including human rights issues. It is quite possible that an Interreligious Assembly of some sort could be a valuable addition to the deliberative and decision making process within the EU also.

I also believe that we need to appreciate deeply the role that families centred on higher level values play in preventing human rights violations. Such families are "*schools of love and peace*" in which grand parents, parents and children alike can develop the heart of love and concern for others that is essential in creating a society based on those same values and in which human rights violations would simply not arise. In my opinion, therefore, anyone concerned with preserving human rights ought also to be deeply concerned to protect marriage and family values and willing to work to prevent any further erosion of those values

Conversely, one can see that those who abuse and exploit others the most, tend to come from disturbed, degenerate or dysfunctional families where there is little or no love and little ethic of "*living for the sake of others*."

Of course, strengthening the family will be of little help to those who have already been damaged or become disillusioned by their own family. That is why strengthening human rights and character education at all levels in society is so important. We need to try everything in our power to help those who have been let down by their family experience and have missed out on the kind of education of values and of heart that, at its best, the family can provide uniquely well. They need to be helped in every possible way to connect to values that will enable them to face their future with confidence. Schools, colleges, training bodies of all kinds, universities as well as the media and entertainment industry can all play an important role in getting across human rights education that can help people relate across racial, ethnic religious and national boundaries and promote social harmony and inclusiveness.

Ladies and gentlemen I am looking forward very much to renewing old friendships with those among you whom I have known before and to getting to know those of you who are here for the first time. God bless you and thank you again for coming!