

16 September 2001

**Statement of H.E. Dr. Han Seung-soo,
President of the 56th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine**

The Right Reverend Bishop Mark Sisk, the Most Reverend John Paterson, the Right Reverend Herbert Donovan, Ms. Fonga Matalavea, Ladies and Gentlemen :

I would like to thank you all for your kind introduction and your invitation to join the congregation of Saint John the Divine here today. I know that this congregation has long demonstrated a special rapport with the United Nations and its work and that you have contributed to the UN's mission in ways both tangible and intangible. On behalf of the entire UN "family," I would like to express my deep appreciation for your unflagging support and assistance.

This service should be an occasion of joy and thanksgiving. Yet the horrific events of last week cast a dark shadow over us as we gather here today. I pray for the victims of the terrorist attacks and for their families and loved ones. I pray also that God's will be done in judging the perpetrators of these crimes. Above all, I pray that the day will come when the hatred that motivates such crimes no longer poisons the hearts and minds of human beings. In this respect, God's work must also truly be our own.

I come from a country that is known for its religious eclecticism. In Korea, the prevailing faiths are Buddhism, Protestantism in its many forms, and Catholicism. Confucianism, which is often described as "a faith without a theology," is a rich part of our cultural heritage and still practiced by many. There are, in addition, hundreds of lesser known religions, churches, and belief systems. And so Korea presents the unusual example of a culturally and ethnically homogenous nation that is nevertheless very religiously diverse.

I think it is fair to say that the Koreans are a deeply spiritual people. Throughout our history, we have looked to a supernatural order – however defined – as giving meaning and direction to our terrestrial lives. However, I would not want to claim this as a distinctively Korean characteristic. I believe that an innate, God-given spirituality is part of the common heritage of all mankind. What makes Korea unusual in this respect is that the forces of modernity seem to have nurtured, rather than weakened, Koreans' spiritual life. Perhaps this is something we share with the people of the United States.

Man's innate religious impulse takes many forms, not all of them overtly religious. In the 19th and 20th centuries, we witnessed the rise of absolutist ideologies, which are sometimes viewed as religious surrogates. Also during the past two centuries, the religious impulse lay behind or directly inspired almost every one of mankind's most ambitious humanitarian achievements –

from the abolition of slavery to the regulation of child labor to the founding of the United Nations in 1945.

In the 19th century, leading thinkers such as Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky feared for the future of morality and civilization itself in an increasingly secular age. As Dostoyevsky famously said, “If God is dead, then all things are permitted.” We now know that the reports of the death of God were, indeed, greatly exaggerated and that the religious impulse, if not always religion per se, can be a powerful force behind the ascent of civilization to ever higher ethical and moral standards.

But what is it, precisely, about most forms of spirituality that accounts for this? Let me suggest that almost all “varieties of religious experience,” to use William James’ phrase, tend to instill in those they touch three core beliefs that are the well-spring of humanitarian action.

The first of these is a belief in human equality. And by this I mean belief in the ultimate unity and common origin of the human race. I am personally unaware of any religious tradition, politically-based cults aside, that recognizes innate ethnic or racial differences. The tendency of all religious thought and experience is, rather, to proclaim the fundamental equality of human beings in relation to a non-human, metaphysical “otherness.” Often, this belief is manifested in and through a “community of believers” that transcends differences of race, language, and nationality. Usually, the community of believers is seen as at least potentially co-terminous with the whole of mankind.

The second belief, which follows on from the first, is a belief in charity as a moral obligation. I do not mean this in the commonplace modern sense of gratuitous philanthropy, but rather in the older sense conveyed by the Latin word “caritas.” Where there exists a community of believers, its moral code almost invariably requires its members to help provide for each other’s spiritual, emotional, and material requirements. Those in need have a religious claim on the resources, love, and attention of the other members of the community, which the latter have an obligation to provide. And since the community of believers and the human race are potentially one and the same, we can readily understand how a religiously-based belief in charity can motivate humanitarian actions. Even when the direct linkage is obscured, I believe it continues to exist at a deeper psychological level.

Religious faith is also usually conjoined with an attitude of hope, which, I believe, is an essential motivation of humanitarian action. Some faiths teach a radical renunciation of the material world and worldly strivings. Yet even in so doing, they hold out to their followers the hope of attaining a better or higher state of being – or, paradoxically non-being. Even the most well intentioned person will accomplish little or nothing without hope. The truly hopeless person is condemned to live a largely instinctual or nihilistic existence.

You will notice that I have taken the New Testament virtues of “faith, hope, and charity” and substituted “equality” for “faith.” This is hardly because I consider faith in any way subordinate. On the contrary, as I have tried to make clear, it is my conviction that religious faith is at the very root of our belief in equality, charity, and hope. On an individual level, nonbelievers may be as

fervent in their pursuit of equality and charity, as deeply imbued with hope, as the most devout believer. But, for mankind as a whole, I have little doubt that the most powerful impulses toward improving the human condition owe their strength and endurance to a religiously -grounded belief in equality, charity, and hope.

For 56 years, the United Nations has striven to channel these same impulses into the myriad projects and programs that have done so much to advance the cause of peace and alleviate human suffering. We must never forget, however, that the United Nations is not an end in itself; its value derives only from what it accomplishes. I understand that Saint John's is one of those congregations that holds itself to a similar standard of service to the local and wider community.

I would like to close by sharing with you a quotation from the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, which I think is one of the most compelling "secular" statements of what religion means to mankind. "The religious vision," Whitehead writes, "and its history of persistent expansion, is our one ground of optimism. Apart from it, human life is a flash of occasional enjoyments lighting up a mass of pain and misery, a bagatelle of transient experience."

Thank you and God bless you all.