

The Challenge of Universal Human Values

THE HISTORY OF humanity is to a large extent the history of its values. These have served as a source for the moral precepts that in the final analysis govern the actions of any given human community. At every major historical turning point, values have changed—they have been enriched or impoverished. But they have always had a common basis, and that is what makes human beings human.

Values have been embodied in world religions. They have inspired both individuals and large groups, and have nourished various ideologies and mass movements. These ideologies and movements have varied quite widely in outlook and in the results they achieved. Many were defeated and disappeared from history's stage without accomplishing much. But the basic values they upheld survived them. These values retained their significance and will do so in the future, because without values human beings are doomed to moral "brutalization" (*odichanie*). "The denial or destruction of values (religious, spiritual, moral, civil, political)," as the great Florentine humanist Giorgio La Pira has written, "inevitably results in injustice, persecution, and oppression."

Today many philosophers and representatives of various religions speak about the crisis of values. Works by outstanding writers are devoted to this subject. Even politicians frequently refer to it. But the situation remains the same. Ancient, universal moral principles, the only basis on which human life can develop, have in many ways been consigned to oblivion or hypocritically used to conceal actions that conflict with those values. Many so-called new values are more like justifications for egoism and self-serving behavior, for pride and ambition, for money-grubbing and unrestrained consumption; they do not seem to be rational principles corresponding to the essence of human nature.

The dilemma formulated by wise men of old—to be or to have?—has taken on new and threatening meaning today. That is because human life is increasingly subordinated to this very desire to have. Consumerism and the desire for things, originating from the negative aspects of the market economy, have pushed into the background any desire for spiritual enrichment or cultural progress, the desire for improving or perfecting human thinking and consciousness. The “freedom to have” is regarded as the highest achievement of history, as its grand finale. Yet this is nothing more than the renunciation of all higher aspirations for a better, a genuinely humane future.

If society enters the future with these current false and distorted values, then it will have no future. It would mean the degeneration of *Homo sapiens*, God’s highest creation.

A return to age-old, spiritual, moral, life-affirming values, to a humanist and genuinely optimistic worldview is one of the decisive tasks of our era. It is a universal human task. A global one. Without the great store of values that have been accumulated over millennia, people will be unable to cope with the dangers threatening them, will be unable to solve problems that have become such serious challenges for them.

As a result of the globalization of society and the increased integration of the world in our time, the entire human race has acquired common global interests, beginning with survival itself. Under these conditions, primordial human values have taken on a special meaning that can be decisive for our entire existence. At the same time, those primordial values have become more inclusive, so to speak. Because the human race has acquired the ability to destroy itself through nuclear war or an ecological catastrophe, the value of life has acquired a certain tragic quality. For the first time in history we face the challenge of defending human existence itself, not just saving the lives of individuals or nations.

The protection of the natural environment has become a high priority for the human community. The task of preventing an ecological catastrophe is undeniably a universal one. This means that moral values must find material expression in world politics. In the final analysis, a system for collective management of worldwide processes must be created, an effective form of collaboration based on equality among nations and peoples. We must know how to combine and jointly subordinate national interests and actions for the sake of worldwide interests and actions. From this value-based viewpoint, we must once again talk about the need for a new politics capable of leading the human race out of its present impasse.

Unfortunately, up to the present time universal human values have too often seemed to exist in isolation, while politics pursued its own course far removed from those values.

In 1995 the world celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the victory over fascism. The history of fascism is probably the most vivid and convincing example of the total and ignominious failure of policies based on suppressing universal human values and breaking with fundamental moral principles.

Examples of similar experiences are also known in Soviet history. I refer, above all, to Stalinism and its consequences, but also to the post-Stalin era when Soviet troops were sent into Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan. These actions contradicted the values and principles of the general human community and dealt painful blows to the Soviet Union.

Today, in the new conditions that have arisen it is not enough simply to appeal to history to condemn the breach between politics and universal human values. It is necessary to think about something else altogether: What are the needs that must be met in this era when no one's fate is separate but rather the fates of all are interconnected? Do not the needs arising from this situation make it imperative that we observe and abide by universal human values? I note with satisfaction that these questions are answered in the affirmative by representatives of the most diverse ideological tendencies and religious faiths, and by scientists of different schools.

But, as ever, politics is lagging behind. Is this not the most profound source of many of the misfortunes we encounter in our times? At this point it should be emphasized that for international politics certain values have acquired especially great significance today. Among these values is tolerance. Given the great multiplicity and diversity of the world, its viability and the viability of its component parts largely depend on how much tolerance there is for differences.

The UN declared the year 1995 to be the Year of Tolerance. The UN Charter states that the display of tolerance is an indispensable principle that must be applied in order to prevent war and maintain peace. This is undeniably correct, but this thought must be carried further: Tolerance has now become one of the most decisive universal human values.

The twentieth century as a whole proved to be a century of intolerance in human relations, social relations, and international politics. The governing principle was intolerance, inspired by nationalism, racism, and an insatiable lust for profits, territory, sources of raw materials, and new markets

for one's products. In our times intolerance has caused many bloody conflicts, from the republics of former Yugoslavia to Somalia, from Rwanda to Sri Lanka, from Afghanistan to Chechnya. This is one phenomenon of history and of the present day that has not spared any of the spheres of human relations nor any region on earth.

The affirmation of tolerance in relations between people, between communities, and between countries, as called for by the UN, is a guarantee that the inherent value of human beings will be recognized, along with freedom of choice for every nation and every minority or nationality.

In the broadest sense, tolerance is respect for the views of others, which rules out any attempt to impose one's own views and convictions by force. It is an appeal for dialogue, a search for ways to prevent conflicts and resolve disputes.

In the realm of international politics proper, tolerance means behavior that seeks mutually acceptable solutions based on a balance between disparate interests. It means painstaking work and negotiations to find compromise solutions in order to resolve the most difficult problems.

Tolerance does not mean an all-forgiving attitude, as many would argue, nor does it mean ignoring differences. It means recognizing differences as the source of ideological, political, and moral enrichment, and thus is a road toward mutual understanding and respect.

All the major positive shifts that have taken place in recent years were possible, above all, because countries that had been enemies were able to arrive at a mutual understanding. They were able to consider one another's disparate interests and find a balance among them.

Mutual understanding is also one of the universal human values. It does not mean ignoring disparate interests; that is, it does not exclude a variety of intentions by different sides in the course of jointly resolving some problem. It does, however, presuppose reaching agreements honestly, examining questions concretely, and of course subsequently carrying out these agreements fairly. If obligations are not accepted and carried out with honesty, there can be no mutual understanding.

To arrive at mutual understanding it is necessary first to know one another better, to understand the concerns of one's partners and the constraints on their actions. This is true not only on the level of political leadership or among politicians in general; genuine mutual understanding can be reached in the best possible way if the populations of the corresponding countries establish relations of mutual trust among each other. Hence the

continuing importance of unprejudiced communication between countries, peoples, and citizens.

The experience of recent years confirms all this. Extensive communication between the citizens of the Soviet Union and of the United States allowed both nations to change their attitudes toward each other, and this became an important political factor.

Tolerance, mutual understanding, and trust are inseparably connected with one more fundamental, universal human value—solidarity. There needs to be solidarity of all people with one another, with the closest and most distant citizens on earth, with the poor and the impoverished, with the suffering and the deprived.

In recent years the world has frequently encountered moving examples of humanistic solidarity. Let me recall, if nothing else, the touching wave of sympathy and support shown for our citizens after the disaster at Chernobyl and the earthquakes in Armenia and on the island of Sakhalin. The world community, many social organizations, and ordinary citizens have displayed genuine solidarity with the victims of wars, especially on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, and with those who have suffered from natural disasters. It seems we can affirm that the spirit of solidarity in the world is rooting itself ever more deeply.

Despite all this, a lack of solidarity can still be felt, mainly in politics at the international level. Instead of solidarity, alienation and indifference toward the sufferings of others often enters in. This applies both to domestic politics and to international politics. A cynical, calculating egoism and even a desire to profit at the expense of the suffering of others is unfortunately present.

In particular, there is an absence of genuine and effective solidarity with the Third World. The need for close cooperation with Third World peoples is being ignored. This creates conditions in which dictatorial regimes can arise, regimes that conduct themselves unpredictably in international relations. It also creates preconditions for countless internal conflicts, resulting in enormous casualties.

The twenty-first century and the entire coming millennium will be an era of universal tragedy if human solidarity does not gain the upper hand over the widespread contempt for the human race itself and the indifference to the fates of millions.

Voltaire once said that the history of preceding centuries had been the history of fanaticism. It can be said that the history of the two centuries since

Voltaire has been the history of ideology or, more precisely, of ideological politics. With the passage of time there has been a steady decrease in the “efficiency factor” with respect to accumulated wisdom. There has been a refusal to recognize the great insights of certain scholars, thinkers, and natural scientists. This was the case, for example, with Malthus in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and Einstein in the twentieth. On the other hand, people’s capacity for self-destruction has increased.

Fanaticism and ideology have not disappeared in our times, but they have lost many of the positions they formerly held. And they are changing their outward appearances, adapting to the new conditions. Today, however—not because of anyone’s wishing it but as a result of objective processes—humanity has entered a world of different proportions, a world in which universal human values have acquired life-or-death significance. To preserve these values, which are the achievement of all human history over many centuries, and put them into operation in daily life is no easy task. It requires, above all, a high level of understanding of today’s problems and no less high a level of commitment to moral values. Neither of these can be achieved without purposeful effort. Such effort must be oriented primarily toward intellectual development and creating cultural preconditions for the solution of emerging problems. This means raising, educating, and training young people properly and emphasizing the role of spiritual principles in everyday life. From this it follows that humanity’s intellectual and spiritual forces have an enormous responsibility.

The development of global thinking for all humanity is now on the agenda. Having roots in common with individual thinking, such global thinking can take shape as a logical result of developing and refining individual thinking. All intellectual history essentially has been the history of the broadening of horizons and boundaries. The time has come when our entire planet must be the horizon.

Today, in fact, human beings are becoming increasingly accustomed to a broader perception of the world. Even without realizing it, we are being drawn into a whirlpool of global events, receiving information from the most varied sources, above all, television, radio, and the press, sharing a vast store of information from the most remote parts of the earth. Today, by the very logic of events, we are being pushed toward an understanding of the need for interaction and cooperation among all nations of the world, toward an acceptance of today’s global realities.

Amid the diversity of human existence, universal features are increas-

ingly coming to the fore. People of varying cultures are being drawn closer together to engage in a dialogue. Barriers are being destroyed, revealing the human essence common to all individuals who belong to different branches of a common tree: world civilization. Human beings, while asserting their sense of self, at the same time are becoming universal entities, beings who strongly feel their ties with all others on the earth. Through this very process a global way of thinking is taking shape.

So then, universal civilizational processes are giving rise to an urgent need for the assimilation and practical application of universal human values. Here, too, politics is lagging behind. But people are becoming increasingly aware of the need for political leadership.