

The Right Not to Kill

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In every epoch of history there are a few exceptional human beings who are blessed with a correct vision of the place of the human person on earth and in the universe. This vision is always basically the same:

- it recognizes the oneness and supremacy of the human family, irrespective of color, sex, creed, nation or any other distinctive characteristics;
- it recognizes each individual human being as a unique miracle of divine origin, a cosmos of his own, never to be repeated again in all eternity;
- it rejects all violence as being contrary to the sanctity and uniqueness of life, and advocates love, tolerance, truth, cooperation and reverence for life as the only civilized means of achieving a peaceful and happy society;
- it preaches love and care for our beautiful and so diverse planet in the fathomless universe;
- it sees each human life and society as part of an eternal stream of time and ever ascending evolution;
- it recognizes that the ultimate mysteries of life, time and the universe will forever escape the human mind and therefore bends in awe and humility before these mysteries and God;
- it advocates gratitude and joy for the privilege of being admitted to the banquet of life;
- it preaches hope, faith, optimism and a deep commitment to the moral and ethical virtues of peace and justice distilled over cons of time as the foundations for further human ascent.

Only people with this simple vision, unmarred by political and personal interests, do ultimately survive in the memory of humankind. They are the great religious leaders, saints, philosophers, artists and humanists of all times. They sing a breath-taking hymn to life, to our planet and to the universe. They deal with the fundamental truths.

Our time has been fortunate to count several such great people, whose number might well be on the increase. We were blessed with a Gandhi, an Albert Schweitzer, a Sri Aurobindo, an H. G. Wells, a Teilhard de Chardin, a Toynbee and, nearer to us, Dag Hammarskjöld, U Thant, Pablo Casals and Mother Teresa. Last but not least, it was the turn of the American soil to produce such a great human being, Martin Luther King. It did it in the true American way: Martin Luther King had his roots in Africa, bore the name of a European and professed a Christian faith born in the Middle East. His life and work overflowed with the unmistakable accents of true vision. One could quote endless thoughts and words of his which make one's heart vibrate, which inspire, which elevate, which make us feel better, greater and proud to be human. Everything he did and said bore the stamp of that same great human dream which is also being sought under the cupola of the UN. This is why he was described as a first citizen of the world, a man of all ages and of all continents. We find in him the same ultimate message left to us by Dag Hammarskjöld and U Thant, namely, that love is the secret of secrets, the great transcending force which alone can break the nemesis of war and violence. These were his words in this regard.

To the crowd gathered outside his bombed home in Montgomery: "We must love our white brothers no matter what they do to us. We must make them know that we love them." In an address to a huge gathering in Washington in 1957: "We must never be bitter—if we indulge in hate, the new order will only be the old order. We must meet hate with love, physical force

with soul force." After being jailed in Montgomery: "Blood may flow in the streets of Montgomery before we receive our freedom, but it must be our blood that flows and not that of the white man. We must not harm a single hair on the head of our white brothers." In the sermon "Loving Your Enemies": "To our most bitter opponents we say: Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you."

Martin Luther King and Pablo Casals were foremost in reminding us of a fundamental human right which is not often heard of in UN debates: the right not to kill and not to be killed, not even in the name of a nation.

Many facets of human rights have indeed been studied, defined and codified over the years, but that one has remained surrounded by a strange silence!

During our human evolution and especially during the last few decades it has become increasingly clear that each individual human life is an astounding miracle. Scientists stand in wonder before their genetic discoveries and the functioning of the human being. The more they discover, the more each human appears as an incredible cosmos which has never existed before and will never exist again in the same form in all eternity. All great visionaries, religious leaders, prophets, philosophers and ethical luminaries knew that by intuition thousands of years ago. Great artists, poets and writers have proclaimed it throughout the course of human history. Pablo Casals and Martin Luther King were two of the latest to proclaim it in the most moving terms and in visible action. Now science is confirming it in its own astonishing ways. There is no doubt that, of all life forms on our planet, humanity is the only one that can elevate itself above its condition, uncover a reality which was closed to its senses, comprehend outer space, inner space and ever larger and smaller infinities, conceive God and transcend itself continuously above its earthly abode. This is why, the more we advance, the more we stand in awe before this miraculous, mysterious, incomprehensible, mindboggling cosmos called a human person.

What conclusion must we draw from this? Pablo Casals had the artist's straight answer when he said: "If I am a miracle that God or nature has made, how could I kill? No, I can't. Or another human being who is a miracle like me, can he kill someone?" He was thus restating a fundamental truth which has been advocated by all great religions and moral codes: "Thou shalt not kill." This law of civilized society is as true today as it was throughout our past history. To break it in any way is to break the fundamental law of civilization. Therefore, at a moment when the entire question of human rights is being so forcefully debated, we must have the courage to place the right of each human person not to kill and not to be killed at the top of the list. This should be the most sacred law of humanity. As one of the most urgent topics for world ecumenism, I would suggest a meeting of the world's religions to agree and proclaim that no human being shall be required to kill in the name of a nation, a religion or any other group.

The time has come to start a new history in this respect. We must establish reverence for life as the cornerstone of civilization: reverence for life not only by individuals, but also by institutions, foremost among them nations. Institutions were created originally for the good and survival of the people. This is their main justification and merit. They have no right to kill or to develop and stockpile incredible arsenals of weapons meant to kill millions of people, possibly all humanity. And the same nations come to the UN and dare to speak about human rights! Do these include the right to life and the right not to kill? Perhaps if we approach the question of disarmament from the fundamental principle of reverence for life, we might achieve better progress. As a humanist and as a member of the human race who has seen so many killings and violations of human rights during his lifetime, I just cannot conceive and accept the idea of a peaceful and orderly planet of armed nations. As we approach the new global age of humanity, we must unequivocally proclaim and enforce this fundamental, sacred and inalienable right and obligation of all human beings on our planet:

THOU SHALT NOT KILL, NOT EVEN IN THE NAME OF A NATION.