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The United Nations as a Spiritual Institution the vision and commitment of Sri Chinmoy

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UN NOT JUST A BUILDING

Most people view the United Nations as a *political* institution whose member states usually act out of narrow national interest. For these people, the UN is a place of clash and compromise. Many progressive thinkers, including most religious leaders, go further and view the UN as an *ethical* organization created to uphold moral and ethical principles for humanity. For them, the UN is an organization for human care and concern. Sri Chinmoy, a contemporary spiritual philosopher and peace advocate, sees something greater and higher still. He sees the UN, not merely as a political and ethical organization, but as a *spiritual* one. And he uses powerful poetic and spiritual descriptors to share his vision.

The UN, he writes, is not a “mere experiment” but an “inner voyage”.¹ It serves not just member states but all people as a vehicle for “universal oneness”. The UN is not only “humanity’s colossal hope” but also “Divinity’s lofty promise” and “God’s own Transcendental Dream”. It exists “not for human glorification, but for the manifestation of God’s Perfection on earth in a practical manner”. It is “not a mere building, but a place of worship”, “a living shrine for the Supreme” and a “nucleus of worldwide spirituality”.²

Such a strong religious and spiritual perspective may be surprising to some. After all, the UN is formally a secular organization. There is no mention of God or a Creator in the organization’s founding document, the UN Charter, unlike many national constitutions. The references to peace in the Charter are about maintaining international peace, not fostering inner peace. After the Charter’s inspiring Preamble, with the opening phrase, “We the peoples of the United Nations”, the rest of the document deals only with states, not peoples. There is no mention of the human family or world citizenship or even democracy at the local or global level. Though respect for human rights is mentioned, they are left undefined in the document. The UN’s principal organs cover political, legal, economic and social matters but omit the religious dimension.³ And, sadly, the organization is, in practice, continually plagued with problems, internally and externally, as witnessed by frequent newspaper headlines. It seems a far cry from perfection. What then are the reasons for Sri Chinmoy’s lofty assertions and bold vision?

Sri Chinmoy’s view of the United Nations, which he calls the “heart-home of the world body”,⁴ does not emerge from starry-eyed idealism. He is not a reclusive spiritual leader maintaining only the thinnest contact with the real world. He is not naïve about the nature of politics in today’s world. No, he actively follows world affairs, has frequent meetings with world statesmen and travels

extensively all over the globe, including to areas of former conflict where UN efforts have met with mixed success, such as in Cambodia, Myanmar, Guatemala, Timor Leste and his native region of the world, South Asia. He has kept a close and constant watch over the UN for more than four decades while living in New York City and visiting the UN on a weekly basis. He has witnessed at close hand the achievements and follies of Secretaries-General and of the UN's main body for the maintenance of peace, the Security Council.

But he persists in loving, serving, appreciating and tirelessly promoting the world organization in an amazing array of activities that reveal almost superhuman capacity. He has conducted over a thousand weekly or biweekly meditations at UN headquarters, which involve periods of silence, spiritual singing and aphorism recitations, since 1970 when the UN Meditation Group was formed. He has organized several thousand programmes to honour UN figures from Secretaries-General to the UN security guards. He created the "U Thant Peace Award", named after the Secretary-General who had warmly encouraged him when he first started his spiritual work at the UN, and has presented the Award to dozens of inspiring world figures, including Mikhail Gorbachev and Nelson Mandela. He has also sponsored the "Lifting Up the World with a Oneness-Heart" awards program "to honour men and women of inspiration and dedication". He organized over a dozen worldwide relay runs for global harmony, the Peace Runs, history's longest torch relays. The biennial Peace Run usually begins at the United Nations (Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza) and proceeds to over 70 countries, with a peace torch passed hand-to-hand Olympic style, galvanizing millions to work for a greater cause. He has given dozens of musical concerts at UN headquarters and exhibited his artwork several times in the foyer of the building. In honour of the UN's 50th anniversary year he went on an extensive tour offering 50 concerts – almost one a week on average. His UN lectures and answers to questions on the United Nations fill over a dozen books. When a book of his UN talks was published in 1995 to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the meditation group, he dedicated it to the "world-illuminating Soul of the United Nations".⁵ He is certainly a man committed to his ideals, particularly this one. For over three decades, Sri Chinmoy has sought to inspire, illumine and uplift the leaders, delegates, staff and civil society associated with the UN.

The UN has appreciated Sri Chinmoy's service in return. All the Secretaries-General have met Sri Chinmoy and they have heaped praise upon him, as have several Presidents of the UN General Assembly and national ministers and ambassadors. U Thant, the Buddhist Secretary-General who had welcomed the formation of the UN meditation group, told Sri Chinmoy that he was doing "a most significant task" for the United Nations by "instilling [in it] moral and spiritual values". U Thant emphasized that only with the loving, compassionate approach that Sri Chinmoy advocates "will we be able to fashion the kind of society we want".⁶ The President of the Thirty-eight Session of the General Assembly, Dr. Jorge Illueca of Panama, perhaps came closest to appreciating the essence of Sri Chinmoy's approach when he said:

We see the United Nations through Sri Chnmoy's eyes as a church of mankind, dedicated to worshipping the aspirations of men, women and children of all races, nationalities and political and religious beliefs for a better life ... As such, the United Nations should become a sanctuary of moral and spiritual values as a better foundation of peace.⁷

Sri Chinmoy's work, Ambassador Zenon Rossides of Cyprus said, "is far more important than all the conferences in the United Nations". Narasimha Rao, as Foreign Minister of India, felt that the work of Sri Chinmoy, whom he called India's "cultural and spiritual ambassador," was more important than that of the Indian diplomat corps at the UN. He was delighted to find during a meditation at UN headquarters "a small corner where real peace dwells".⁸ Countless other leaders, diplomats and staff, echo these remarks: Sri Chinmoy and the meditations he leads provide a real

source of peace for them and for the organization. Some would even add: nourishment for the UN's soul.

It is the soul of the organization that Sri Chinmoy values most. Although theologians may argue if organizations, like individuals, have souls, for Sri Chinmoy there is no doubt. It is his perception of this spiritual aspect of the UN that led him to serve the organization so devotedly for so many years. To better understand Sri Chinmoy's spiritual vision and appreciation of the spiritual nature of the UN, it is appropriate to examine the philosophy of his august and eminent mentor, Sri Aurobindo, at whose ashram in Pondicherry, India, he lived, meditated and studied for twenty years.

SRI AUROBINDO AND THE EVOLUTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Sri Aurobindo was one of the spiritual and intellectual pioneers of international organization, as well as one of the early intellectual leaders of India's independence movement. Writing at the very dawn of the idea, when an organization of independent nations for peace was merely a vague notion in the minds of a few, he charted the future of this great dream.

During World War I, when Europe was convulsing in a self-destructive dance of war, Sri Aurobindo wrote masterfully and prophetically about the need and "inevitability of some kind of world-union of free nations". His works, titled, "The Human Cycle", "The Ideal of Human Unity" and "War and Self-Determination" (1915-18), were pathfinders in laying out the foundation and planting the seeds, perhaps deep in the consciousness of humanity, for the development of international organization. In 1916, Aurobindo advocated a "first scheme to which the life of humanity could turn for a mould of growth in its reaching out to a unified existence". Perhaps not by coincidence, that same year, Woodrow Wilson became the first serving American president to endorse the concept of a world organization for peace. After the Great War, as it was called, President Wilson pushed for a League of Nations and chaired the Commission of the Paris Peace Conference that drafted the League's Covenant, thereby bringing into being the world's first international organization for peace and earning him the title of Father of the League. Wilson would declare in February 1919: "A living thing is born."⁹ (As an aside, Woodrow Wilson's daughter, Margaret Wilson, moved to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in India after her father's death and lived there until 1944, the same year that Sri Chinmoy entered the Ashram as a permanent resident.)

For Aurobindo, "the whole secret of earthly existence" is that all life is in "progressive evolution of a Spirit".¹⁰ He welcomed Wilson's initiatives in Paris, hoping that international law would be "an effective force which will restrain the egoism of nations as the social law restrains the egoism of individuals", and delighted when the League of Nations "was in travail of formation".¹¹ In the inter-war period, however, he bemoaned the fact that the League was "constantly misused or hampered from its true functioning by the egoism and insincerity of its greater members".¹² Prophetically, he had noted in 1916, that difficulties and disappointments were "bound to help" the process of unification, since once begun it would be "impossible for humanity to draw back".

When the United Nations was created after the World War II, Aurobindo recognized it as a continuation and improvement of the League: the same spirit, the same general structure, and, unfortunately, some of the same flaws. He lamented, for instance, that the "oligarchy of big Powers" witnessed in the League was a strong surviving element with the new United Nations, as seen in the "preponderant place assigned to the five great Powers in the Security Council and clinched by the device of the veto".¹³ More positively, Aurobindo prophetically wrote, shortly before he left the earth in 1950, that the arrival of the world-threatening Cold War was a confrontation that could be eliminated and harmony established. Much further in the future, he envisaged a "single world-State" as "the final outcome which the foundation of the UNO [i.e., United Nations Organization] presupposes".¹⁴ (He also envisaged a "United States of Europe"

which was made concrete less than a half century later in the formation and solidification of the European Union.) In most of Aurobindo's writings, the motor of evolution for international organization arises from "the drive of Nature towards larger agglomerations" for "the law of the community or nation ... is to harmonise its life with that of the human aggregate and to pour itself out as a force for growth and perfection on [*sic*] humanity".¹⁵ Behind this evolutionary process lay the notion of the "nation-soul".

Nolini Kanta Gupta, Aurobindo's close friend and disciple as well as the Secretary of the Aurobindo Ashram, provided an incisive articulation of the nation-soul concept:

A Nation is a living personality; it has a soul, even like a human individual. The soul of a nation is also a psychic being, that is to say, a conscious being, a formation of the Divine Consciousness and in direct contact with it ...¹⁶

He further presaged Sri Chinmoy's view and experience in his statement that "[t]he individual can know of and come in contact with the nation's soul in and through his own soul".¹⁷ Sri Chinmoy elaborated upon this idea of the evolving soul of international organizations.

SRI CHINMOY AND THE EVOLUTION OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION

When asked about the creation of the UN, Sri Chinmoy said: "the Supreme created the soul of the United Nations the day the vision dawned in the heart of Woodrow Wilson".¹⁸ By contrast, Sri Chinmoy also wrote:

If we say that the United Nations is the result of the twentieth century awakening, then we are mistaken. The United Nations is the outgrowth of the inner awakening of human beings from time immemorial.¹⁹

Thus, it was the aspiring cry of humanity that lay at the foundation of international organization, and it was the receptivity of President Wilson as an individual leader and the world collectively that allowed "God's hour" to strike in 1919, heralding the dawn of world organization. The United Nations, created towards the end of the Second World War, followed naturally. "Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations," Sri Chinmoy explains, "actually offered its wisdom-light to its future child, the United Nations."²⁰ The chief proponent then of the Wilsonian vision in 1944-45 was President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had served earlier as an Assistant Secretary in Wilson's Administration. Another UN-supporter was President Harry Truman, who achieved unconditional US membership in the UN in 1945, something that, ironically (given Wilson's leadership in Paris), never happened in the League.

In the final session of the League of Nations in Geneva in 1946, Sir Robert Cecil, who had helped draft the League's Covenant in Paris a quarter century earlier, gave voice to this notion of an automatic transfer of authority and identity by declaring: "The League of Nations is dead! Long live the United Nations!" in analogy to the unbroken succession of British rulers. All the possession and properties of the League became part of the UN. Similarly the structure was maintained: an Assembly, a Council, a Secretariat headed by a Secretary-General, as well as economic, social and other bodies.

While many were ready to brand the League a failure because it was unable to prevent a second World War, Sri Chinmoy expressed sympathy and compassion for the first attempt at world organization. "The League did not fail," he said, "we must view the League as a loving mother and the UN as the promising child. It gave us wisdom-light to the UN. It is the same soul that is operating in and through the UN."²¹

So gradually the dream was being fulfilled. In the evolution of international organization, we can see the progress made thus far, however uneven it has been and however far the goal. Along with an appreciation of its spiritual basis, the future appears bright to Sri Chinmoy. "At the United Nations," he says, "what we feel is an inner voyage."²² He cautions patience: for the UN to mature, time is a factor. Criticisms of the UN are unfair, he says, because we cannot expect everything from the UN, just as we cannot expect adult achievements from a growing child.

In the process of institutional growth, each UN action, whether labeled as success or failure, is "an experience of God". Instead of focusing on the perceived errors of the world organization, Sri Chinmoy urges people to identify with the "all-loving, all-nourishing and all-fulfilling" soul of the UN. By recognizing this inner reality, we can help bring this spiritual reality to the fore and "transform the outer reality".²³

While the United Nations has its own soul, it also is a "garland of nation-souls". In this case, the total, the "group-soul" to use Aurobindo's expression, is more than the sum of the parts. While a garland of flowers is a joy to behold, the United Nations is more than its member states. From the spiritual point of view, it is something greater, vaster and deeper than the sum of its parts. For instance, the UN Secretaries-General have become the spokesmen for humanity, not just the voice of an assembly of nations.

For those who see the imperfections in the UN and its Charter, Sri Chinmoy points out that while the political dimension of the United Nations may not be perfect, the Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) emerge from deep spiritual principles which are eternal. Ethical and moral principles are based on spiritual ones. The Charter and the UDHR are the "true *manifestations* of humanity's spiritual values and inner oneness. In these lofty principles we find a divine code of ethics for our time and times to come."²⁴

For those who are unable to fully understand or appreciate the spiritual nature of the organization, he provides reassurance:

Unlike political power, the spiritual power works in silence. Therefore it is not noticeable to our human eyes, but it is being constantly felt in the hearts of those who are crying for a better, more illumining, more fulfilling life on earth.²⁵

In parallel with physical and political history, a spiritual history is being "recorded in the soul of the United Nations", he tell us. In this spiritual history, the meditation group undoubtedly features large and Sri Chinmoy is one of its great champions. Furthermore, he calls on individuals from all corners of the world to join this inner adventure.

The UN is "not only for the delegates and representatives of the various nations", he says. "It is for all those who have aspired and do aspire and will always aspire." It is our "own aspiration that will expedite the vision for the United Nations".²⁶ For those not working at the United Nations, "one can best serve the United Nations ... by keeping in one's heart the main principles of the United Nations".²⁷ And he assures us that "all those who are sincerely crying for a oneness-family, according to their receptivity, are receiving light from the soul of the United Nations".²⁸

With this background, we can conclude that Sri Chinmoy's praise for the UN is far more than an exercise in positive thinking or a penchant for laudation; it is, rather, a deep spiritual recognition of an underlying reality that he sees at its foundation. By recognizing and cherishing this spiritual "reality" he helps bring it to the fore and invites us to do the same.

THE FUTURE

What is the future of the world organization? Sri Chinmoy's bold reply is: "The League of Nations was a dream-seed. The United Nations is a reality-plant. The aspiring and serving life of man's universal oneness will be the eternity-tree."²⁹ Will there be a third generation of world organization? Sri Chinmoy only gives us a few hints. He praises Albert Einstein as a wisdom-tower when the scientist-sage declares "[t]he United Nations now and world government eventually must serve one single goal: the guarantee of the security, the tranquility and the welfare of all mankind"³⁰ Whether a new organization, a democratically established world body, is created to embody the dream is not known, but one can say that the evolution of the United Nations is progressing. By adopting the vision of Sri Chinmoy, we can maintain great hope for the future of this spiritual organization. He writes:

The inner vision of the United Nations is a gift supreme. The vision the world can deny for 20, 30, even 100 years. But a day will dawn when the vision of the United Nations will save the world. And when the reality of the United Nations starts bearing fruit, then the breath of Immortality will be a living reality on earth.³¹

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NOTES

¹ Sri Chinmoy, *The Garland of Nation-Souls: Complete Talks at the United Nations*, Health Communications, Deerfield Beach, FL, 1995, pp. 21 and 27.

² *Garland of Nation-Souls*, p. 38.

³ Religion is mentioned in the Charter only in the context of non-discrimination on the basis of “race, sex, language, or religion” (see Article 1, para. 3).

⁴ “United Nations: The Heart-Home of the World Body”, title of brochure by “Sri Chinmoy: The Peace Meditation at the United Nations”, c.1985.

⁵ *Garland of Nation-Souls*, p. xi.

⁶ The U Thant quotes can be found in *Oeness-World-Peace-Gifts: Statements and Tributes by the United Nations Community on the Occasion of the Eighteenth Anniversary of Sri Chinmoy: The Peace Meditation at the United Nations* (SCPM), SCMP, United Nations, New York, 1978, pp. 3-5. It is also found in *U Thant: Divinity's Smile, Humanity's Cry*, Agni Press, New York, 1977.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 14.

⁸ Quotes from Ambassador Rossides can be found in *Oeness-World-Peace-Gifts*, p. 18-19, and from Foreign Minister Rao on p. 45.

⁹ Wilson, Woodrow, “Address to the Plenary Session of the Paris Peace Conference”, 14 February 1919, found at <www.search.eb.com/elections/pri/Q00145.html>, accessed 4 February 2005.

¹⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *The Evolution of Consciousness*, at <www.intyoga.bravepages.com/evolcons.htm>, accessed 11 August 2004.

¹¹ *The Ideal of Human Unity*, Preface to the Second Edition.

¹² Sri Aurobindo, Chapter VII (“The Ideal Law of Social Development”) in *The Human Cycle* (originally published serially in *Aria* in 1915-1918), reprinted in *The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity, War and Self-Determination*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, India, 1977, p. 49n., at <www.humancycle.hrvc.net/sriaurobindo/hctext.htm>, accessed 11 August 2004.

¹³ Sri Aurobindo, “Ideal of Human Unity - A Postscript Chapter” (Addition made in April 1950), Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library, Vol. 15 (Social and Political Thought), Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, India, 1972, at <intyoga.online.fr/ihu_pc.htm>, accessed 4 February 2005.

¹⁴ Sri Aurobindo, postscript chapter (added in April 1950) to *The Ideal of Human Unity*, found in *The Human Cycle*, at <intyoga.freeservers.com/ihu_pc.htm>, accessed 11 August 2004.

¹⁵ *The Ideal Law*, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Gupta, Nolini Kanta, “The Soul of a Nation”, at <intyoga.online.fr/nation.htm>, accessed 11 August 2004.

¹⁷ Similarly, Sri Chinmoy responds to the question “What is the soul” with the answer that “it is the soul alone that can teach us, through our own inner experience according to his own inner light.” He quotes Voltaire to show the limited capacity of the mind to know the soul: “Four thousand volumes of metaphysics cannot teach us what the soul is.” *Garland*, p. 29.

¹⁸ Sri Chinmoy, *My Meditation Service at the United Nations for 25 Years*, Agni Press, Jamaica, NY, 1995, p. 29, at <www.srichinmoylibrary.com/meditation-service/39.html>, accessed 13 August 2004.

¹⁹ Poster by Sri Chinmoy, “The Peace Meditations at the United Nations”, c.1985.

²⁰ *Garland of Nation-Souls*, p. 55.

²¹ “The Inner Role of the United Nations” in *Garland*, p. 55.

²² *Garland of Nation--Souls*, p. 27.

²³ *Garland of Nation-Souls*, p. 18.

²⁴ “The New Ethics: The UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” in *A Soulful Tribute to the Secretary-General: The Supreme Pilot of the United Nations*, Agni Press, Jamaica,

NY, 1978, (emphasis added) at <www.srichinmoylibrary.com/soulful-tribute/13.html>, accessed 3 February 2005.

²⁵ Questions and Answers, *Meditation at the United Nations: Monthly Bulletin of the United Nations Meditation Group*, Vol. V, No. 2, 27 February 1977.

²⁶ *My Meditation Service*, p.95.

²⁷ *Flame Waves*, Part 9, at <www.srichinmoylibrary.com/sri-chinmoy-flame-waves/part9/39.html>, accessed 3 February 2005.

²⁸ “United Nations Day” in *The Inner Role of the United Nations*, Agni Press, Jamaica, NY, 1993, at <www.srichinmoylibrary.com/inner-role-united-nations/8.html>, accessed 3 February 2005.

²⁹ “The Tears of the United Nations” in Sri Chinmoy, *The Inner Message of the United Nations*, Agni Press, Jamaica, NY, 1974, at <www.srichinmoylibrary.com/tears-nation-hearts/1.html>, accessed 3 February 2005.

³⁰ Sri Chinmoy, *Einstein: Scientist-Sage, Brother of Atom-Universe*, Agni Press, New York, 1979.

³¹ *Garland of Nation-Souls*, p. 19.