

WELCOME TO NORWAY!

President's Address,

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Mrs. Minister, Officers of the IHEU International and in Norway, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

It is indeed a great honor to open this Ninth Conference of the IHEU, in the year 1986 of the Christian era. Some day we might be able to devise a better way of calculating time than using the alleged birth year of the founder of only one of the world's many religions, ideologies, general tenets of belief. Norway also had the honor of hosting the Third Conference in 1962; the first and founding conference was in the Netherlands in 1952 and the second in London in 1957. We can report that this is a country where humanism has a considerable support in the population. According to public opinion polls we are supported by 17% of the population; much more than half a million of our population of 4 million. And the reasons for this are not so difficult to find: according to paragraph 2 of the Norwegian Constitution there is an official religion in this country, even a state religion: not just christianity in general but protestant christianity; not just protestantism in general but lutheranism; not just lutheranism but evangelical lutheranism. A filtering process of considerable significance when one takes into account the whole richness of human efforts to come to grips with the major problems of our existence, canonizing that very special approach as the approach, giving the rest of the world less of a chance. And this has left an imprint on kindergartens and schools, all over.

Hence, the humanist ethical movement in Norway also became, from the very beginning, a protest movement against this effort to impose upon people a faith not of their own conscious choice. I myself was a part of that protest movement when 24 October 1945, at

nine o'clock in the morning, I knocked at the door of our local minister and told him that I wanted to leave the state church. Why that day?--because according to law I could not do so before I was 15 years old and that was my fifteenth anniversary--it also happened to be the birthday of the United Nations!--and the office opened only at nine o'clock. "A typically protestant act" was the comment of my Japanese wife when she learned about this, "it shows how deeply Norwegian you are!" And there is something to that: I think we are a morally inclined people, even to the point of moralism--deeply concerned and interested in problems of religion and philosophy questioning dogma, not necessarily accepting what we hear. Consequently the Norwegian branch should have ahead of it a future with quickly expanding membership and right now its already rather big with 28 to 30,000 members, by far the highest number per capita in the world and number 3 in size as a national chapter. Quickly expanding, that is, until a counter-movement starts building inside the organization if it shows signs of dogmatism; our task is to contribute to ethical consciousness by keeping the debate open, always willing to question any assumption.

Well, some years after I had left the state church I started studying mathematics and natural sciences up here at the University of Oslo, Blindern campus where you are right now. And one of the first persons I met, impressing me as he had impressed so many others, was Kristian Horn, "amanuensis" in botany at the University, a person devoting himself, even dedicating his life to work for the humanist ethical movement not only in this country where he

was founder and president of the union for 20 years, but also outside the confines of Norway. He was tremendously instrumental in bringing about what was so much needed those first years, the trade union aspect of our movement: alternative services for confirmation, marriage already having been provided for a long time, name-registration and, of course, funeral services. I am not sure this work has been completed--I think we are still in need of deeper, more beautiful ceremonies for these important transition rites in life. But what we have in our country is to a large extent due to the untiring work of Kristian Horn. I use this occasion to pay homage to him, and to express my own personal gratitude to Kristian for the deep inspiration he left with so many in general and myself in particular.

But I also want to welcome you to Norway!--a country which used to be number 1 or number 2 in missionaries per capita, and probably also in bad weather per capita--in fact, per capita statistics is what we prefer, being small that can still make us big. This is a country located in the periphery of the center of the world, sufficiently close to the center to benefit from the twin aspects of that western center--both its amazing cultural achievements and political innovations, and its deeds of exploitation and repression, of imperialism and barbarism around the world. Being close to the center makes it possible to share the spoils and the fruits; being in the periphery makes it possible to wash our hands of the more repulsive aspects, standing pure and clean on the world arena--

or at least so we tend to think of ourselves, as "a country without colonial traditions".

This is a country, I think with quite deep roots in the past. We were great before the Christian Era came to our country, according to tradition in the year 1030. The Viking period was our period of expansion, westwards to what today is known as the United States, eastwards to what today is known as the Soviet Union. I would not say that we bear responsibility for both of them but it is still said in the Soviet Union that the worst people in the KGB are those with blue eyes and fair hair, just as it is said in Latin America that the worst CIA people have exactly the same anatomical characteristics. Where did they get them from?

However, today you will find Norway as a country with three, to my mind, rather positive characteristics.

First, there is a dedication to nature which is absolutely genuine. Not that we do not commit ecological crimes. But there is an awareness that a crime is a crime, an outrage, a popular mobilization against such acts of sacrilege. I shall return to this issue in a minute, let me only say that we Norwegians are rather deeply convinced that few countries can match ours in beauty when the sun shines. You may object that that happens only rarely to which we might respond that he who really believes in nature would not be in need of sunshine in order to appreciate its beauty. Besides, it does happen, although usually just before foreign friends arrive--the weather yesterday being the best.

Second, there is a general pattern of egalitarianism in our country. Roughly speaking we were saved from that major vertical construction found almost all over Europe, feudalism. We were too much in the periphery, too barbarian, too small; the topography did not lend itself easily to feudal constructions. One family-one farm, maybe with access to some fishing, was and is still the dominant pattern. And then there is another family with one farm on the other side of the hill, of the fjord, of the swamp-- at any rate, at a distance. In Norway you do not derive much prestige from just having a high position in society; you have to prove yourself. People are not terribly impressed by titles. And even persons who prove themselves shall not believe that they are that much more than anybody else--this is our famous Law of Jante which makes us quite different from such continental European countries as Germany and France. Be modest, don't shine too much.

Third, in spite of the high but mainly compulsive membership in the Norwegian state church I think we are basically a rather pagan country. There is a sense of the sacred and a sense of the profane. But this is tied above all to the relationship to nature. The Norwegian Cathedral is our nature. A sense of that which is above ourselves and also ties us together comes to us individually in the proverbial single individual hiking through the mountains, up and down, hither and thither deeply disturbed if we should happen to come across somebody else. And collectively: come to this country a sunny Sunday in February and watch half of Oslo on

ski, just outside the city! Our god is in nature and that god has selected Norwegians more than anybody else as proven by the beauty of our country; what would be more reasonable than we paying allegiance to god nature by being kind, even devoted to earth?

So, I think our people is essentially pantheistic with a christian overlayer for 10 to 20% of the population, and then a lot of christian inspired institutions. I think our problem is that this is coupled to a tendency to regard Norway as a model for others not only to admire but also to imitate and copy--a tendency that might become very dangerous if we were big, not as small as we are. Our greatest contribution to world peace is our smallness.

For us Norwegians loyalty to the United Nations, to human rights, to the environment, to norms of solidarity with others in their struggle for self-respect and survival come naturally at least as long as there is nothing in this threatening ourselves. I think we believe in the unity of humankind, not hampered by the problems of really big countries that see themselves as considerably more equal than others and think unity can best be brought about by bringing others under their "protection" culturally and economically, militarily and politically. In short, ours is a very positive attitude to life, a Yes to Life as is the motto of this Conference. To a full and rich life for all, materially and spiritually, all over the world. With no people chosen above others, with no country entitled to set itself up as the guiding light for others, with the Law of Jante valid internationally as well. And life can become just beautiful, much better than its reputation in the press, so often maligning the human condition.

Yes to Life--but sooner or later life comes to an end for all of us. What then, what about death? What is our answer to the mystery of death, to the tragedy of being bereaved of those dear to us, of ultimately ourselves facing biological extinction?

Most Norwegians according to our public opinion data seem to believe in some kind of afterlife; only few seem to believe in the specifically christian or evangelical lutheran way of spelling out that afterlife. However, I think again I can hark back to Viking times. There was a saying in those days, known and dear to all Norwegians, and I shall quote it for you not only in Norwegian but in a Norwegian more similar to the language of those days:

Døyr fe, døyr frendar  
døyr sjølv det same

Men ordet om deg  
aldri døyr  
vem du eitt gjetord gjev

Eg veit eit som aldri døyr  
dom om daudan kvar

There is a certain primeval strength in these words; I shall not try to translate. The idea is very simple: cattle die, so do your friends, so will you do yourself sooner or later. But there is one thing that never dies: the verdict, the judgment--your reputation. You, we, live on in what we leave behind, our acts, our deeds and the memories of them. Some have a short, some a long afterlife--some are forgotten quickly, some are never forgotten. But that quantitative dimension is less important than

the dimension of quality: how we are remembered, for the good, for the bad. Not in an afterlife up there or down there; in an afterlife here, on earth, in the minds and hearts of the human beings we leave behind when we say goodbye. Our Nordic ancestors must have seen this as a major guide in life. I think they were right.

I hope you will enjoy our country, that you will combine the conference with a visit where you can explore for yourselves our nature, our social construction, our way of being. We are not great but we are not that small either; just profoundly human. With these words I would like once more to wish you welcome, and to declare the 1986 Humanist World Congress opened.