Global Forum in Oxford Faces Human Survival
Category : May 1988
Published by Anonymous on May. 01, 1988

Global Forum in Oxford Faces Human Survival

Spiritual and Political Leaders Grapple with War, Ecological Chaos and Poverty in Five-Day Summit

If man finds the fear of his own death difficult to confront, consider the possibility that the human race itself is in mortal danger and could perish forever. That was precisely the enterprise for which approximately 140 of the most influential men and women from 60 nations gathered at Oxford University in England from April 11-15. The imposing title of the conference was "Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders on Human Survival." But that name is brevity itself when set beside the litany of omnious threats which were presented to them by astrophysicist Carl Sagan, biologist James Lovelock, Soviet nuclear scientist Dr. Yevgeny Velikhov and other preeminent experts in population, media and education. Humankind has awakened to the terrible revelation that the earth and its tiny cargo of living things are vulnerable and, unless something is done soon, one day man himself, like 100 species disappearing each year, may become extinct.

Despite the fearsome threats ahead - or perhaps driven by them - the participants (who included as representatives of Hinduism the Hawaii-based founder of Saiva Siddhanta Church, H.H. Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, and our own Hinduism Today editor, Siva Palaniswami) resolved at the end of their conference to work against the perils of armaments, for the balancing of natural resources and populations, and in aid of "vulnerable groups, particularly women and children." They affirmed "our shared vision of survival, and we commit ourselves to work for a fundamentally changed and better world."

Colorful Confluence of Cultures

As Carl Sagan stood beneath the 15-foot photo of the earth which was to symbolically preside over the deliberations in Oxford's Old Town Hall, he was moved by the spectacle of colorful national dress to describe this historic event, "It

is like the meeting of the cousins, the gathering of the human tribes."

Not since the Middle Ages had legislators and spiritual leaders met at such a level, and then it was limited to European statesmen and Christian leaders. The 1988 Global Forum brought nearly 60 nations together, and had representatives of five major faiths - Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism, as well as African and American Indian religions, Jainism, Sikhism and Shinto.

Opening ceremonies included a message from Rajiv Gandhi read by Indian minister Sat Paul Mittal, addresses by the Archbishop of Canterbury and others (criticized as all-too-Christian in tone and content). Despite that provincial beginning, the tribes gathered. Barefoot African priests in heavy, bright togas and woven crowns. Orthodox bishops in midnight robes and intricate golden pendants, American Indians with long, bandana-held hair and carved wolve's bolo, Assissi monk in simple grey-coweled vestments, Indian swamis in hand-woven saffron robes, bearded and beturbaned Sikhs, Mongolian priests in yellow and red raiment with quaintly peaked cap and dozens of others in dark frocks, yarmulkes and clerical collar.

Joining these spiritual men and women were an equal number of impressive political leaders, members of the parliaments of nations large and small: Russia, Togo, Peru, India, Malaysia, America, Cote d'Ivoire, Spain, Israel, Egypt, Gambia, etc. Among them was August Voss, member of the USSR's Supreme Soviet. He and other Russians, including the first woman cosmonaut, Valentina Tereshova (who said the "earth looked too small and helpless from space"), stressed one subject above all others: nuclear disarmament.

Dean James Parks Morton of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York, told the press that China - fully one-third of the human family - did not attend because of the presence of the Dalai Lama. He added that forum organizers, hopeful of future participation of Taoism and Confucianism, had left two seats open on the leadership body.

The Parameters of Survival

What are the problems that endanger us? In no particular order, war (there are 24 armed conflicts in progress today, and one official war between Iran and Iraq), hunger, poverty and inequity of resources, debt, drugs, desertification, illiteracy, unbridled population growth, religious fundamentalism, disintegration of ecology, loss of species and social injustice.

Our perilous predicament was pronounced each morning by theme speakers, each offering one piece of an emerging mosaic with its tiles of terror and tenderness, helplessness and hope, idealism and urgent pragmatism. Their collective voice affirmed again and again that the problems before man, though horrific, are finite. Against these difficulties are arrayed the infinite resources of the divine, the courageously creative human spirit and the power of hope.

Speakers Share Their Concerns

As the five days unfolded, it was evident that delegates shared the urgency voiced by Austrian Cardinal Koenig: "We have come together to find ways out of crisis. There is only one choice: to survive or perish together." To this Robert Runcie, Archbishop of Canterbury, added: "There are two qualities for survival, reverence and cooperation. We need to control our spiritual hubris. We need to cease believing this is a cheap, throw-away universe in which everything but human life is expendable." Africans stressed the vast schism that exists between rich and poor nations, decrying "excess materialism and unbridled consumption."

Akio Matsumura, a Japanese population expert who spent 15 years promoting the forum, was patently pleased with the caliber of people who had responded to his call, "I have observed the deepening crisis of the world. It is too big to be borne by governments alone. We as individuals must also bear the responsibility." Mr. Matsumura told Hinduism Today: "This is a process that will place great demands on Hinduism and on the insights it has mastered in its more than three mellennia of development. Hinduism is one of the world's most powerful and enduring traditions. Hindus were among those who first called for a Global Forum on Human Survival. The Global Forum now offers Hinduism an opportunity to continue to speak directly to those who make practical policy in the world. Hinduism, in turn, has much to offer the Global Forum. We hope to hear from Hindu thinkers on the course we should take in the years ahead and to receive whatever suggestions you can give us."

James Lovelock, English atmospheric biologist, offered an interpretation of the earth as a self-sustaining system, "much like a giant tree under whose broad canopy hundreds of creatures, large and small, are sustained…I believe science moved a long way in the wrong direction. We threw out the soul. I wonder if we have lost our natural curiosity because of sensory deprivation-all of us living in cities, unable to see the stars." He went on to tell delegates that the greenhouse effect, forest clearing ("driven by an insatiable desire for beef) and agricultural excesses "are more important than nuclear problems we have heard." Dr. Lovelock called himself the "shop steward for all non-human life, all the microbes and fungi" whose existence was also threatened. He offered simple solutions to what he called "the three deadly 'C's': cars, cattle and chainsaws," asking people to plant trees and to reduce beef consumption.

Dr. Wangari Maathai, founder of the tree-planting Green Belt Movement in Africa, gave the most impassioned of the discourses. She drove home the analogy of "man as dust and source," calling upon man to live closer to both the source and the dust, to stop "the suicidal destruction of plants, which lie bleeding everywhere and which are really more precious than silver and gold."

How to Kill the Planet

"Not one other world is, like ours, graced with life," started Carl Sagan, "and that rareness and precariousness gives us yet another reason to fight for life." Dr. Sagan began his shopping list of dangers with the burning of fossil fuels, noting, "The carbon released when we burn oil, coal, wood or gas combines with oxygen to produce carbon dioxide - invisible and colorless, yet opaque to infrared light. This unseen canopy of gas keeps solar heat trapped and the earth's temperature thus rises. By 2050 the average planetary temperature will increase 1-2 degrees centigrade. That may not seem like much, but it will be sufficient to melt the polar ice caps. The level of the sea, by 2100, may rise enough to inundate all costal cities of the world."

Dr. Sagan noted how interdependent nations have become, how the problems produced in one country (forest depletion or ozone destruction through the use of chloroflorocarbons) affect the human family everywhere. To cope, new global ethics and institutions must arise.

He cited statistics on the proliferation of nuclear armaments, what he called "a vast and obscene collection of 60,000 warheads." On the whole planet "there are only 2300 cities with populations over 20,000. We could destroy all these cities and still have 57,700 warheads left over...A single nuclear submarine has the capacity to destroy 200 large cities," or virtually an entire large nation - all under the command of one man. Dr. Sagan asked delegates to ponder what man could achieve if just a fraction of the $2 trillion now expended on "defense" each year by the US and USSR (that's $400 for every man, woman and child on earth) could be directed toward more humane goals. "Where are the cartographers of human purpose?" he lamented at one point, then ended saying that "if the US and USSR must compete, let it be in science, in eliminating drugs and poverty."

The Dalai Lama's presence caused the biggest stir, partly because his unadorned talk of love and compassion cut to the core of the human dilemma, pointing to the heart as the place to transform both self and world. His message of mutual respect and understanding, of resisting the urge to propagate one's faith and to replace it with a desire to contribute usefully to humanity as a whole were messages needing to be heard. For this, the exiled Buddhist god-king was the perfect spokesman.

Family Planning and Population Control

Dr. Fredrick Sai, Population Advisor to the World Bank, spoke on family, stressing the special burdens imposed on women in the undeveloped nations "where maternal mortality rates are 1-200 times greater than in developed countries." He made an appeal for responsible family planning, with an ideal goal, for health and other reasons, being "to space children two or more years apart, which would itself eliminate 10-20% of infant mortality and raise health standards." He saw great hope in emerging birth control technologies, including an anti-pregnancy vaccine being worked on in India and "systemic contraceptives such as sub-dermal implants which last up to five years and are removable at any time."

Ironically, Mother Terresa, the 77-year-old Albanian Catholic nun who founded the Sisters of Charity and who has served the poor and dying in India for many years, addressed the delegates next, arguing against contraceptives and abortion. Her strongly-worded message was at great odds with Dr. Sai's views, and a palpable tension fell upon the assembly for the first and last time.

Delegates who asked to remain anonymous oppose the aged nun's views, telling Hinduism Today that human suffering is exacerbated by such "an irresponsible speech which really promotes poverty and famine" especially in Africa and South America where the Catholic Church has great influence. One scientist pointed out that until recent history it made ethical sense to argue against contraception, but that for reasons of demography, health and human rights the present predicament makes it "extremely maladaptive for the human race not to control the birth rate."

One of the most eloquent theme speakers was Sri Lanka-born journalist Tarzie Vittachi. The erudite and nimble-minded Mr. Vittachi spoke on "Media and Human Values," opening with a quick reference to the law of karma and to the life of man which always includes "an inner and an outer dimension." He shared a concern for Colonial consciousness and related a 1946 meeting he had with Gandhi, in which the Mahatma's counsel to Indians soon to be free was "Reduce your wants. Satisfy your needs. Our wants make us vulnerable. Why increase our vulnerability?" He ended with "human survival is the greatest story since creation."

Channels for the Future

Most of what happen at Oxford was, as Mr. Vittachi would say, "process and not event." It was people of great influence meeting others, seeing the diversity of cultures and thought and, yes, defining the problems. Siva Palaniswami described it this way: "We did not expect, nor did we encounter, many down-to-earth solutions to the matrix of problems. So, was it worth it? Yes. Returning over the pole, my intuition was that mankind itself, through this unique interaction, is developing a new nervous system. Delicate nerve fibers are growing out, uniting with others to create the channels along which experience and information will later be shared and motor responses fired. Wisely, I think, pat answers were deferred at Oxford so this more elemental process could unfold."

Planners of the Global Forum envision the five days in Oxford as the beginning of a long-term process. Looking to the future, they have expanded their staff and will set out to coordinate regional meetings on several continents within a year or two, with another Global Forum in 2-4 years. When next they meet depends in large measure on the support, financial and otherwise, their crucial cause can attract. Anyone interested in the emerging global consciousness, in the growing interdependency of nations, in the principle of harnessing man's efforts toward a more harmonious and compassionate existence and, not to forget, the little matter

of survival is urged to contact GLOBAL FORUM FOR HUMAN SURVIVAL, 304 East 45th Street, 12th Floor, New York, New York 10017. Our editor's assessment will appear in the next issue.