

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS
KOFI ANNAN
LECTURE ON GLOBAL ETHICS

“DO WE STILL HAVE UNIVERSAL VALUES?”

Tübingen University, Germany, 12 December 2003

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let me start by thanking Professor Küng – not only for that very kind introduction, but also for inviting me here to give this lecture. I was deeply touched when, eighteen months ago in Berlin, he handed me a note asking me to do this as a birthday gift for him, at any time after his 75th birthday on 19 March 2003.

As you know, dear Hans, I had not intended to make you wait so long for your birthday present. I had hoped to be here on April 30th. The pressure of world events made that impossible, but here I am now. And yet I cannot really think of this lecture as a gift from me to you. It is you who do me a great honour, by asking me to speak on your home turf, on a subject – global ethics – about which you have thought as profoundly as anyone in our time.

Indeed, I realise now that the title I chose for my lecture might even strike you as a little offensive. When someone has written as extensively and inspiringly about universal values as you have, it seems rather impertinent for me to march right into your Global Ethics Foundation and question whether we still have such things at all!

Let me spare you any suspense, and tell you right now that my answer is Yes! The values of peace, freedom, social progress, equal rights and human dignity, enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are no less valid today than when, over half a century ago, those documents were drafted by representatives of many different nations and cultures.

And they were not any more fully realised in actual human conduct at that time than they are now. Those great documents expressed an optimistic vision, not a description of existing realities. Let's not forget that among the states that drafted and signed them was the Soviet Union, at the height of Stalin's terror, as well as several unrepentant colonial powers.

The values of our founders are still not fully realised. Alas, far from it. But they are much more broadly accepted today than they were a few decades ago. The Universal Declaration, in particular, has been accepted in legal systems across the world, and has become a point of reference for people who long for human rights in every country. The world has improved, and the United Nations has made an important contribution.

But universal values are also more acutely needed, in this age of globalisation, than ever before.

Every society needs to be bound together by common values, so that its members know what to expect of each other, and have some shared principles by which to manage their differences without resorting to violence.

That is true of local communities and of national communities. Today, as globalisation brings us all closer together, and our lives are affected almost instantly by things that people say and do on the far side of the world, we also feel the need to live as a global community. And we can do so only if we have global values to bind us together.

But recent events have shown that we cannot take our global values for granted. I sense a great deal of anxiety around the world that the fabric of international relations may be starting to unravel – and that globalisation itself may be in jeopardy.

Globalisation has brought great opportunities, but also many new stresses and dislocations. There is a backlash against it - precisely because we have not managed it in accordance with the universal values we claim to believe in.

In the Universal Declaration, we proclaimed that “everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services”.

Just three years ago, in the Millennium Declaration, all states reaffirmed certain fundamental values as being “essential to international relations in the twenty-first century”: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature, and shared responsibility. They adopted practical, achievable targets – the Millennium Development Goals – for relieving the blight of extreme poverty and making such rights as education, basic health care and clean water a reality for all.

Many millions of people in the world today are still far from enjoying these rights in practice. That could be changed, if governments in both rich and poor countries lived up to their commitments. Yet, three years after the Millennium Declaration, our attention is focused on issues of war and peace, and we are in danger of forgetting these solemn commitments to fulfil basic human rights and human needs.

Globalisation has brought us closer together in the sense that we are all affected by each other’s actions, but not in the sense that we all share the benefits and the burdens. Instead, we have allowed it to drive us further apart, increasing the disparities in wealth and power both between societies and within them.

This makes a mockery of universal values. It is not surprising that, in the backlash, those values have come under attack, at the very moment when we most need them.

Whether one looks at peace and security, at trade and markets, or at social and cultural attitudes, we seem to be in danger of living in an age of mutual distrust, fear and protectionism – an age when people turn in on themselves, instead of turning outwards to exchange with, and learn from, each other.

Disillusioned with globalisation, many people have retreated into narrower interpretations of community. This in turn leads to conflicting value systems, which encourage people to exclude some of their fellow human beings from the scope of their empathy and solidarity, because they do not share the same religious or political beliefs, or cultural heritage, or even skin colour.

We have seen what disastrous consequences such particularist value systems can have: ethnic cleansing, genocide, terrorism, and the spread of fear, hatred and discrimination.

So this is a time to reassert our universal values.

We must firmly condemn the cold-blooded nihilism of attacks such as those that struck the United States on 11 September 2001. But we must not allow them to provoke a “clash of civilisations”, in which millions of flesh-and-blood human beings fall victim to a battle between two abstractions – “Islam” and “the West” – as if Islamic and western values were incompatible.

They are not, as millions of devout Muslims living here in Germany, and elsewhere in the West, would be the first to tell you. Yet many of those Muslims now find themselves the objects of suspicion, harassment and discrimination, while in parts of the Islamic world anyone associated with the West or western values is exposed to hostility and even violence.

In the face of such a challenge, we can reassert universal values only if we are prepared to think rigorously what we mean by them, and how we can act on them.

That means we must also be clear about what they are not. And one thing that should be clear is that the validity of universal values does not depend on their being universally obeyed or applied. Ethical codes are always the expression of an ideal and an aspiration, a standard by which moral failings can be judged rather than a prescription for ensuring that they never occur.

It follows that no religion or ethical system should ever be condemned because of the moral lapses of some of its adherents. If I, as a Christian, for instance, would not wish my faith to be judged by the actions of the Crusaders or the Inquisition, I should be very careful to judge anyone else’s faith by the actions that a few terrorists may commit in its name.

Also, our universal values require us to recognise the human characteristics, both good and bad, that we have in common with all our fellow human beings, and to show the same respect for human dignity and sensitivity in people of other communities that we expect them to show for ours.

That means we should always be prepared to let other people define their own identity, and not insist on classifying them, however well-meaningly, by our own criteria. If we believe sincerely in individual rights, we must recognise that an individual’s sense of identity is almost always bound up with the sense of belonging to one or more groups – sometimes concentric, sometimes intersecting.

Therefore the rights of an individual include the right to empathize, and to express solidarity, with others who share this or that aspect of that individual's identity.

And that in turn should affect the way we define the obligations of citizenship, in each of our national communities. We should not oblige people to dissociate themselves from the fate of their co-religionists, or ethnic kin, who are citizens of other states.

Muslims, for example, should not be reviled or persecuted because they identify with Palestinians or Iraqis or Chechens, whatever one thinks of the national claims and grievances of those peoples, or the methods used in their name. And no matter how strongly some of us may feel about the actions of the state of Israel, we should always show respect for the right of Israeli Jews to live in safety within the borders of their own state, and for the right of Jews everywhere to cherish that state as an expression of their national identity and survival.

But if it is wrong to condemn a particular faith or set of values because of the actions or statements of some of its adherents, it must also be wrong to abandon the idea that certain values are universal just because some human beings do not appear to accept them. Indeed, I would argue that it is precisely the existence of such aberrations that obliges us to assert and uphold common values. We need to be able to say that certain actions and beliefs are not just contrary to our own particular morality, but should be rejected by all humanity.

Of course having such common values does not solve all problems, or eliminate the scope for different societies to solve them in different ways.

We may all be sincerely committed to non-violence and respect for life, and yet disagree about whether it is legitimate to take the lives of those who have themselves taken life, or to use violence to defend the innocent when violence is being used against them.

We may all be genuinely committed to solidarity with our fellow human beings and a just economic order, and yet not agree which policies will be most effective in bringing about that order.

We may all be deeply attached to tolerance and truthfulness, and yet not agree how tolerant we should be of states or systems that seem to us intolerant and untruthful.

And we may all be genuinely committed to equal rights and partnership between men and women, without agreeing on how far the social roles of men and women should be differentiated, or whether it is the responsibility of society to enforce the sanctity of the marriage bond.

On all such issues we must expect differences to continue for a long time – between societies and within them. The function of universal values is not to eliminate all such differences, but rather to help us manage them with mutual respect, and without resorting to mutual destruction.

Tolerance and dialogue are essential, because without them there is no peaceful exchange of ideas, and no way to arrive at agreed solutions allowing different societies to evolve in their own way.

Those societies that consider themselves modern need to recognise that modernity does not automatically generate tolerance. Even sincere liberals and democrats can sometimes be remarkably intolerant of other views. One should always be on one's guard against such temptations.

On their side, societies that put a high premium on tradition need to recognise that traditions survive best, not when they are rigid and immutable, but when they are living and open to new ideas, from within and from without.

It may also be true that, in the long run, tolerance and dialogue within a society are best guaranteed through particular institutional arrangements, such as multi-party elections, or the separation of powers between legislature, executive and judiciary.

But these arrangements are means to an end, not the end in itself. No society should consider that, because it has found them useful, it has an absolute right or obligation to impose them on others. Each society should be given the space, not to distort or undermine universal values, but to express them in a way that reflects its own traditions and culture.

Values are not there to serve philosophers or theologians, but to help people live their lives and organize their societies. So, at the international level, we need mechanisms of cooperation strong enough to insist on universal values, but flexible enough to help people realise those values in ways that they can actually apply in their specific circumstances.

In the end history will judge us, not by what we say but by what we do. Those who preach certain values loudest – such as the values of freedom, the rule of law, and equality before the law – have a special obligation to live by those values in their own lives and their own societies, and to apply them to those they consider their enemies as well as their friends.

You don't need to be tolerant of those who share your opinions, or whose behaviour you approve. It is when we are angry that we most need to apply our proclaimed principles of humility and mutual respect.

Nor should we ever be satisfied with things as they are. The state of the world does not allow that.

In our own case, at the United Nations, we are sometimes tempted to proclaim our self-evident utility and relevance to the world, and to blame our member states for not making better use of such a valuable institution. But that is not enough.

We need to do everything we can to improve the United Nations – that is, to make it more useful to the world's peoples, in whose name it was founded, and more exemplary in applying the universal values that all its members claim to accept.

That means that we need to be more effective in many aspects of our work, and especially in what we do to promote and protect human rights.

Human rights and universal values are almost synonymous – so long as we understand that rights do not exist in a vacuum. They entail a corresponding set of obligations, and obligations are only meaningful where there is the capacity to carry them out. "Ought implies can."

So what is my answer to the provocative question that I took as my title? Do we still have universal values? Yes, we do, but we should not take them for granted.

They need to be carefully thought through.

They need to be defended.

They need to be strengthened.

And we need to find within ourselves the will to live by the values we proclaim – in our private lives, in our local and national societies, and in the world.