

The attack on Charlie Hedbo is a tragic violation of Human Rights: Steinar Murud

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Steinar Murud in an exclusive interview with the Editor-in-Chief of The Oslo Times Håvard Solberg at the Head Quarter of the Oslo Times International News Network in Oslo.

Steinar Murud is the Secretary General of Universal Peace Federation in Norway, since 2003. During his reign he has successfully organized a series of conferences and events in the area of interfaith peace building, marriage and family, humanitarian service, human rights, and peace and security. Murud is also the editor of the Norwegian UPF website, a lecturer in the field of religion as well as an experienced event-manager. Along with that, he has a broad business background that gives him a practical sense—from a health food business to running a hotel to being a fisherman to selling leisure boats he has done it all.

This extremely dynamic Secretary General of Universal Peace Federation (UPF), Norway, in an exclusive interview with The Oslo Times International News Network, spoke about what Human Rights mean's to him the attack on Charlie Hebdo, the work UPF has done, its global achievements and a whole lot more.

The excerpts below give us an in depth understanding of his views and the kind of work UPF has done to establish peace and order in countries that need it the most.

What does human rights mean to you?

I believe human rights are divine rights. The value, dignity and freedom of being a human being are absolute. God created us in his image and he created us to be free. And he does not restrict our freedom even though we make wrong choices, therefore human rights are divine and absolute. They serve as a guarantee for people's security and provide the freedom for people's growth and development. The attack on Charlie Hedbo in Paris on Wednesday is one of the most tragic violation of these rights. Violence and terror is never accepted, this is just a pure criminal act.

However, with rights comes duties. We can say that the privilege of freedom must be followed by responsibility. We speak so much about human rights but it is equally important to talk about our

human responsibility. We all need to strive to be responsible individuals. Responsible to take care of each other and to take of the world we live in. Human rights are necessary in order to build a peaceful world but I do not think they are enough. A world of responsible people can take us all the way towards a peaceful goal.

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Could you tell me about the activities of Universal Peace Federation , UPF, in Norway?

All of our activities are directed towards world peace. There are three areas we have focused on. The first one is interfaith relations. Religions are important ways to elevate the human spirit. We believe all religions are meant to serve all mankind, towards the building of a peaceful world. But in a world with conflicts that involve religions we try to come back to the root. Our interfaith conferences strive to find the common values, how to contribute to peace and to build trust and good relationships. Many of the conferences have taken place in local churches, temples and mosques, and in partnership with the respective congregations.

The second focus-area has been family values. The idea of a peaceful world must be built from the grass root level. And the grassroots level is the family. The family unit is a micro society. Loving family relations benefit the social environment and serve as a building block for a safe and sound society. Many conferences have been organized to address this topic from different perspectives. Many UN International Day of Families have been celebrated at the Diakonhjemmet University College in Oslo.

Our third area of activity are service projects. We are doing two projects. One is regular shipments of surplus clothes to Estonia. This project has been done for many years. The other project has been on a European level were we have sent medical equipment to support a Red Cross hospital for children in Pyongyang, North Korea.

What has UPF achieved so far?

Sometimes achievements can be difficult to measure. Spiritual accomplishments cannot always be counted in dollars or kroners. However we have brought thousands of people together from all different faiths in Norway. Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'i, to name a few, we have also participated in meetings and events. We have brought participants to meetings in Europe or other parts of the world and even to the Middle East. We should not underestimate the value of such exchange. Meeting someone from another culture or religion can change your perspective completely. The reflections of the participants testify to this.

What would you say have been UPF's achievements at a global level?

Our international activities serve the same purpose; to contribute to world peace. With representation in most countries in the world there are many projects that could be mentioned. I will mention three of them. The first one is the efforts for peaceful relations between North and South Korea. Our founder Dr. Sun Myung Moon comes from North Korea but was a strong opponent to the communist Juche ideology.



In spite of this he reconciled with president Kim Il Sung in a meeting that helped creating a new policy between the North and South. Dr. Moon received permission to build a peace center in Pyongyang. This center opened in August 2007. Many sports and cultural exchanges were organized. Behind the tension between North and South, UPF played a calming role. The regime respected Dr. Moon and his Federation and awarded him a National Reunification Prize, posthumous, right after his passing in 2012. Even during the most tense period in the spring of 2013 they sent gifts to his widow on her birthday. I am sure soft diplomacy is important to prevent hard conflicts.

In the Middle East UPF organized hundreds of events, starting after the second intifada in 2003. The atmosphere was tense, suicide bombings took place even close to the hotel of one of the events and the tourist industry had collapsed. At that time the Middle East Peace Initiative started with significant delegations of religious leaders from all over the world coming to Israel. Al Aqsa mosque opened the doors to them all, even though it was an interreligious group. On the political side the initiative was welcomed by Yassir Arafat. Culture centre was opened in Gaza. Service projects were done in Bethlehem. Many conferences were organized in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Religious leaders, politicians and academics attended from the region and from all over the world. Even though the conflict is still hot the efforts for peace never go in vain and the initiative keeps going.

In Nepal UPF played a role in the process to enable democratic elections in 2008. A series of leadership conferences took place from 05 – 08. Mahatma Gandhi's grandson participated in one of them and stated; «Why are we talking about the need for the Maoists to give up violence, why don't we talk to the Maoists?» It was reported in the media, and the Maoists started to attend. The Maoist leader Prachanda responded to UPF's principles for peace. These conferences and meetings continued and contributed to the democratic election in 2008, in which Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda) was elected as the prime minister.

How is UPF funded?

UPF is an NGO with a special consultative status in the economic and social committee in the UN. The federation is independent of governments, also when it comes to funding. Each national chapter of UPF is responsible for their own programs and its funding. In Norway I must admit we have a low budget that basically comes from private sponsors. From time to time we have received project funds from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We always report back and the reports have always been approved.

The international HQ in New York organizes international conferences and events. The key speakers are usually funded by UPF international while other guests are sponsored by the local UPF chapters. To my information the international HQ has various businesses and organizations as sponsors.

What do you think of the Islamic extremists in Europe?

Extremism is a problem wherever we find it. All my Muslim friends tell me that Islam means peace and that we all need to coexist in a peaceful way. But the extremists think they are superior to others, and show no respect for alternative thoughts. Their ideology has left the concept of religion and has adopted concepts you find in Nazism, communism or Darwinism. They all talk about their own rights and oppose all others. Islamic extremism is based on a dangerous ideology, disguised as a religion and we need to find ways to prevent its development.

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What is your opinion on right wing groups?

Right wing groups and Islamic extremists are more similar than they think. They are both based on the idea that they are superior in some way. None of them has anything to offer to create a peaceful world.

What do you see as the biggest challenge or threat for humanity today?

Spiritually I think we can say that mankind's fundamental problem is our separation from our common Creator; God. We have lived like orphans with no feeling that we are related to each other through our common Creator. People are driven by self-interests rather than God's interests. Who can see this world from God's point of view? Very few unfortunately. This mindset is an obstacle to world peace.

This mindset has many faces. Sometimes in the form of nationalism, some time in the form of racism or some time in the form of religious extremism. To change this mindset is a fundamental challenge. May be we need a global education movement to cultivate the human spirit. But if I should pinpoint the most dangerous expression of it; it would probably be the religious extremism.

What would be the best strategy to deal with extremism?

The best way is to find ways to prevent it. The strong growth of ISIS shocked all of us. But it was not created over the night. ISIS in Iraq grew out of a long period of resentment and frustration of not being included or listened to by the Shia dominated government. It would of course be impossible to say that a policy of inclusion would have prevented ISIS from rising. But I would certainly think it would have been a better strategy. I believe the Norwegian policy to include minorities has helped to reduce conflicts between religious groups and lessened the development of extremism here. People

that feel excluded are always in the danger zone of becoming an opponent or in the worst case and extremist to their society. We need to avoid that. On the other hand, when prevention does not work, and we see extremism in the form of violence and terror, we have to deal with it as any other criminal act.

How can we deal with the human rights violations in North Korea?

As long as the regime continues there is realistically little one can do. There is no way to interfere in internal matters or single cases, particularly not in North Korea. The only way is to keep working with the regime. Never give up the hope of peaceful dialogues. Even if we disagree completely with the ideology and strongly condemn the horrible human rights violations, we need to show to the regime that we care for their country and love its people. We are not their enemy. We want to help the North Korean people. This is the way to build trust. And based on trust, mutual development can take place. Many think that the North Korean regime is paranoid and sees enemies everywhere. They might be right but I still think that too strong condemnations and boycotts could be counterproductive and could drive the regime into an even stronger paranoia, resulting to more enmity.

I believe there is hope. At the moment there is a desire from both sides to talk. A united Korea will be a wonderful blessing for the entire nation, for the region and the world. I believe and hope that this vision can catch fire both in the North and the South. We need **to cling to this vision in order to secure human rights in North Korea.**

Who is Dr. Moon to you?

For me UPF's founder, is a man with a divine calling. He says that he was called to his mission directly from God, when Jesus appeared to him after spending a night in prayer. I see him as a man with a divine agenda rather than a human one. I mean that he is a man that does what he believe is God's Will in spite of human trends or political correctness. He always spoke his mind even at the risk of his life.

I have been a member of many organizations in search for a better world but I have never come across anybody of Moons calibre. He was strongly involved with Korea's independence movement during the Japanese occupation. He was arrested, tortured, but did not give any information. Still he worked to help the Japanese officials to escape to safety after the war. In spite of Korean hostility towards Japan he was a strong spokesman for reconciliation with Japan.

He is known as the initiator of the Japan Korea tunnel project. He was a pioneer behind the New Village movement in Korea, he is the founder of the Little Angles Children's dance group; a flagship of Korean culture. He is also the founder of many businesses in the area of machine tools, health and tourism. He is also dedicated to a free world without totalitarian regimes. A series of conferences and seminars eventually led him to meetings with both Gorbachev and Kim Il Sung. These meetings resulted in respectively; diplomatic relations between Russia and South Korea and the end of the annual anti American propaganda week. During the cold war he initiated the Washington Times newspaper as an alternative voice in the US capital. This was a needed newspaper that brought many new reports from behind the iron curtain. The interfaith area was a high priority for him. He inspired the making of the «World Scripture», an anthology of sacred texts, made by a large committee of religious contributors. He suggested to set up an interreligious council in the UN in order to facilitate religions into a constructive force for peace. This initiative was seriously followed up by the Philippine government.

I have witnessed so many conferences that he initiated, over and over, all of them to secure good international, intercultural and inter-religious harmony.

As I mentioned initially, behind his external work lies a spiritual drive, motivated by his relationship to God. His personal faith is his driving force. He says that he feels God's sorrow, and as long as he feels this, he cannot rest. Some just call him a businessman. I know for sure that he is rather driven by a spiritual call, but in a very practical way. He speaks about the promised kingdom and says it will come, but emphasizes that we are the ones that are responsible to build it.

In 2012 he passed away. But his legacy remains. He took upon himself an enormous task; building a world of peace, that was his calling. He led an extraordinary life, inspired many and accomplished much.

I am one of the inspired ones that share his vision, and I hope and work to see this dream come true.



Steinar Murud in an exclusive interview with The Editor-in-Chief of The Oslo Times International News Network, Hatef Mokhtar, at The Oslo Times Headquarter, Oslo.

What do you think of the Oslo Times and do you have a message for its readers?

I am inspired and impressed by The Oslo Times. I visited your office in the summer last year. I am impressed that you could organize such a team of journalists and correspondents in so many places in the world. I am impressed by all the news that you can provide. I am also inspired that by the fact that you are more than a commercial enterprise, you have an idealistic ambition of contributing to a free world with respect for human rights.

My message to the readers is a spiritual one. Mankind's problems are fundamentally not the lack of money, materials or any other physical value. Our problem is a spiritual one. The heart of the problem is the human heart. Seven billion people with hearts to serve will solve all problems in the world. It is easy to say but it is still the simple truth. All kind of initiatives that promote such a culture of service and peace, should be stimulated.

Many cultures blossomed around some religion. I believe each religion brought new light to the world. They elevated the human spirit and made the foundation for cultural development. We need to find this essence in our faiths and work together. I am sure that with sincere hearts and sincere efforts, the invisible but absolute God will be able to guide us to the final chapter in his providence; the building of a peaceful world.

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