

LIBRARIES, PRECURSORS OF WORLD PEACE

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It is always fascinating to watch what goes on at the entrances of big libraries like the BPI (Bibliothèque Publique d'Information – Public Information Library) at the Georges Pompidou Centre. Eight to ten thousand readers stop by every day: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, rich, poor, conservative people, and those who are not, “believers and non-believers” alike. Just take a look at the library shelves: the number of different opinions is even more extraordinary; an infinite variety of languages and ideas are represented.

There is so much ground for conflict between the many opinions that you could expect the worst. But this does not happen: the books coexist peacefully and the readers respect this peace. And there lies the magic of libraries: by definition a library is a place where differences are respected. Except of course, in totalitarian countries where relentless efforts are made to reduce differences through censor and fire.

It is also for this reason that libraries are symbols: symbols of accepting others, the foundation of peace. Being on peaceful terms with your neighbor means you must be able to accept his differences, coming to the library means accepting to rub shoulders with opinions far removed from your own. The Library, in this respect, is a little metaphor of international organizations like the UNO, devoted to dialog and peace: each member country, each delegate knows that in the confines of these walls, respect for one’s neighbor is essential if any dialog is to take place.

So it is not surprising that the UNO library is named after a man who, forty years after his tragic death, remains very much alive as a symbol of the essence of peace and dialog which I have just evoked. Dag Hammarskjöld was a man of great culture: he had a doctorate in economics but was also passionately interested in literature, music and painting. It seemed that no area of knowledge, from humanities to the sciences, was out of reach of this open-minded and curious-spirited man.

But he also knew, like many others from his generation who partook in the major dramas of the first half of the century, that culture alone could not save

us from barbarism. In order for peace and progress to prevail, good will and order must develop alongside.

More than anyone else, Dag Hammarskjöld knew this, endeavouring, as secretary general to the UNO from the time he was elected in 1953 until his death in 1961, to make the UNO into a strong and independent organization, capable of making its voice heard and of imposing reason in whatever conflict arose. He did this with both a consistency and an obstinacy that commanded respect, illustrating that which he declared at the time of his election: "I inherited a belief that no life was more satisfactory than one of selfless service to your country or humanity. This service requires a sacrifice of all personal interests, but likewise the courage to stand up for your convictions." On all fronts, he was convincing belligerents to reach agreements. In the Middle East, he was already advocating an entente between Israel and the Arab countries; and in Africa, most notably in Congo, he worked tirelessly; he never became discouraged, explaining in 1960 that, "working at the edge of the development of human society is to work on the brink of the unknown.

As a librarian who just spent four years in Alexandria, Egypt building a big, beautiful library worthy of the prestigious great age, let me tell you how much our present agrees with Dag Hammarskjöld. We know that he played a major role resolving the Suez Canal crisis in 1956, avoiding the worst, preserving peace by allowing Egypt, this great and magnificent country to develop independently. Who would have imagined then that only a few miles from the Suez Canal, a new symbol of peace and culture – the Bibliotheca Alexandrina – would one day be erected and is to officially open next April? This library, strategically located between the West and the East, the North and the South, in the spirit of its namesake, must once again draw the wise of the entire world together, in a sort of posthumous tribute to the works of Dag Hammarskjöld. Since it is a library that will hold all official publications, it will be like a sort of Middle Eastern annex to the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, aiming to close up the gap between industrialized and developing countries in the area of access to information and knowledge (the theme of this afternoon's session). It will be another opportunity for the DHL to shine in its noble duty as the great peace-serving library.

The DHL plays this role through the excellence of its collections, through the skills of its librarians, through the numerous services that it provides, not only to serve the UNO but for the benefit of the entire library community for whom it is both a model and reference.

May the library be thanked and encouraged, through this symposium, and continue to pursue and develop its vital role for all of humanity.

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