



Acceptance Speech | 2025 Spirit of the United Nations Award

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Your Excellencies, esteemed fellow awardees, distinguished guests, dear colleagues in civil society—particularly the leaders and members of the NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values, and Global Concerns—ladies and gentlemen:

Today, I am truly honored to receive the 2025 Spirit of the United Nations Award, and I do so with a heart full of humility and gratitude. This special recognition isn't just mine—it belongs to everyone who passionately works toward justice, peace, and human dignity. It's for those who see the United Nations not just as a political body, but as a moral and spiritual journey that brings us all closer together.

The NGO Committee's inspiring vision of a global culture of peace—built on justice, solidarity, compassion, and deep respect for life—is not just an idea; it's something we actively practice every day. This vision extends beyond religion, ethnicity, gender, and location, encompassing all aspects of our personal and social lives. It encourages us to fill every moment with purpose, warmth, and meaning.

Being recognized by a committee of peers who highly value divine essence, inner wisdom, and the oneness of life calls us into greater accountability. It urges us to ensure that our work in multilateral spaces is not only strategic but also spiritual, that our diplomacy is both practical and ethical, and that our advocacy is not only bold but compassionate.

In 1955, Charles Malik, a Lebanese philosopher, diplomat, and key architect of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, highlighted the UN's spiritual importance. He noted that, despite being shaped by national interests, the UN contains a spiritual energy that arises when nations uphold common norms and values.

This voluntary alignment with higher principles—truth, justice, peace—makes the UN a spiritual space.

Malik's insight profoundly aligns with my perspective that spirituality extends beyond mere religious practice. It constitutes a mode of existence within the world—a dedication to principles that surpass borders and ideological differences. Moreover, it serves as a moral compass, guiding our interactions with others, particularly in the intricate landscape of multilateralism.

Multilateralism, at its core, is a spiritual practice. As a political body of nation-states, it may not openly reveal that. But the ability to listen across differences, negotiate with empathy, and build consensus based on mutual respect—that's spiritual.

To navigate this multilateral arena, you need friends, not enemies. It's the understanding that no nation, community, or individual can thrive alone. We are interconnected, and our futures are linked.

In my work across borders and nations with ecumenical and interfaith groups, I have seen how spirituality can motivate collective action. I have noticed how faith-based organizations bring moral clarity to key international issues—such as climate justice, migration justice, human rights, and peacebuilding.

Faith-based actors remind us that the UN is not just a place for governments, but a community of conscience where civil society, religious leaders, and grassroots movements come together to speak truth to power.

The Spirit of the United Nations lives in this community. It lives in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is based on the principle of sovereign equality, which ensures that every nation, regardless of size or power, has a voice. It lives in the dialogue among cultures and religions, which fosters understanding and solidarity.

That Spirit is what animates this award you are bestowing on four of us, and I am truly grateful.

But we must also acknowledge the challenges.

Ladies, gentlemen, and friends:

The UN is often criticized for its bureaucracy, slow pace, and susceptibility to political paralysis. However, its spiritual significance does not lie in its perfection but in its ongoing effort. It is through convening, deliberating, and seeking common ground that the UN embodies the spiritual energy of human cooperation.

Former UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld said it well: The United Nations was “not created to take mankind to heaven but to save humanity from hell.”

The Spirit of the UN Award is a shared aspiration, not a personal accolade. It promotes peace, security, development, and dignity for all. The award reminds us that diplomacy, political will, and civic courage are essential to turn oppressive governance into justice, uneasy alliances into peace, and irresponsible development into sustainability.

When we blend the spiritual with the normative, we not only imagine but also actively practice providing food and freedom, jobs and justice, land and liberation. These are not just rhetorical pairings; they represent the holistic nature of human rights—encompassing civil and political, economic, social, and cultural rights. They embody spirituality in action, where values meet policy, and compassion meets justice.

In other words, as the Roman Catholic Sisters of Marin County said in a poster they published: "At the table of peace shall be bread and justice."

Spirituality is the grounding of one's soul and the mooring of one's heart, so that one's mind focuses solely on improving the welfare of humanity rather than on oneself. It is the deepest anchor from which human dignity draws courage. Human rights find sustenance in spirituality. When one loses and abandons such spirituality, one's ethical compass is jarred, and moral bearing is lost.

This brings me to a crucial point: a transformative multilateralism—one that respects and upholds the core principles of the UN—has a broad view of inclusion. Inclusion not just of people, but also of the planet. It is a multilateralism that acknowledges the interconnectedness of all life and the urgency of ecological justice.

Transformative multilateralism requires involving multiple actors, giving civil society access to the UN's premises, agenda, decision-making, and commitments. Access should go beyond just a badge — it needs to be a voice, influence, and partnership. My shorthand for this is "access to the premises and the promises of the UN."

This multilateralism must also be intergenerational. We need to involve youth not just as future leaders but as active participants today. Their energy, creativity, and moral clarity are essential. We also need to honor the wisdom of Indigenous peoples, whose knowledge systems offer deep insights into sustainability, community, and the sacredness of life. Their voices should not be tokenized—they must be prioritized.

In Isaiah 1:18, the Prophet Isaiah declares: "Come now, let us reason together." This is not a passive invitation — it is a moral duty. It calls for dialogue, discernment, and shared responsibility, especially in his vision to "beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks."

This shift — from weapons of war to tools of cultivation — presents a significant challenge. It requires courage, sacrifice, and imagination. But it must remain central in how we think and act. It is the spiritual core of peacebuilding.

As we celebrate this moment, let us recommit ourselves to this vision.

Let us be spiritual diplomats—people who speak truth with love, negotiate with integrity, and advocate with compassion, willing to dispense justice in the way Cornel West described when he said, “Justice is what love looks like in public.”

We live in a world in surplus of fear and in deficit of hope. In such a world, our spirituality calls us to come together as builders of bridges, not walls—connecting across different cultures, faiths, and ideas in our collective effort for the common good.

Let us protect hope, especially when fear and despair try to take over the conversation.

And let us remember that the Spirit of the United Nations is not a relic of the past — it is a call to build and shape a shared future. It is a summons to live out the values we proclaim, to embody the principles we endorse, and to be the change we wish to see.

Good afternoon.