

TEMPLETON REPORT

NEWS FROM THE JOHN TEMPLETON FOUNDATION

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“A Davos for Human Rights”

“Statistics and government pronouncements cannot capture the experiences of individuals under tyranny,” says Thor Halvorssen, president of the New York-based Human Rights Foundation. If you want to get people involved in the struggle for individual freedom, Halvorssen told the *Templeton Report*, they need to hear “the stories of heroic figures who have stood up for this noble purpose.”



In May, the Human Rights Foundation sponsored the Oslo Freedom Forum, a gathering of such heroes held in the Norwegian capital and attended by 200 human rights activists from around the world. “It was like a Davos for human rights,” says Halvorssen, whose organization received a grant from the John Templeton Foundation to stage the event and to create educational materials based on it.

Famous dissidents like the former Chinese labor camp prisoner Harry Wu and Vladimir Bukovsky, a Russian scientist who suffered years of imprisonment and torture by the KGB, shared their experiences with each other and with the audience. But moving testimony was also offered by less well-known figures, like Mutabar Tadjibayeva, whose protests against oppression in Uzbekistan earned her solitary confinement and forced psychiatric treatment; Victor Hugo Cardenas, a former vice president of Bolivia whose home and family were attacked by operatives of President Evo Morales; and Jacqueline Moudeina, one of Chad’s first female lawyers and an advocate for victims of the country’s former strongman, Hissène Habré.



Clockwise from upper left: Vladimir Bukovsky, Harry Wu, Palden Gyatso, and Jacqueline Moudeina.

Abdel Nasser Ould Ethmane, who grew up in an elite family in Mauritania that kept slaves even after slavery was abolished there in 1981, told the audience in Oslo about his dawning awareness of the evils of the practice and how it inspired him to work on behalf of those still in bondage. Palden Gyatso, a Tibetan monk who was held and abused by the Chinese government for more than three decades, declared that, in the struggle for the rights of Tibet, “it is very important to stick to nonviolent means.” Halvorssen was especially pleased to see the comradery among the attendees. All of the speakers, he noted, made a point of attending all of the other speeches.

Video testimonies were also offered in Oslo by the Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, the former Czech president Vaclav Havel, and Yelena Bonner, the widow of Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov, all of whom now have difficulty traveling because of health problems and advanced age. In fact, it was the realization that many of the heroes of the 20th century’s human rights struggle were disappearing from the scene that gave Halvorssen the idea for the conference. “Why not bring them together in one place and give them an opportunity to talk to each other?”

He immediately settled on the idea that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn should be the first speaker. “He changed history with his books. He fundamentally altered people’s understanding of the horror of the Soviet Union.” But only weeks after Halvorssen sent Solzhenitsyn a letter of invitation last summer, the great author had a stroke, and he died a few months later.

Kimon Sargeant, vice president for human sciences at the Templeton Foundation, is quick to point out that Solzhenitsyn was also a hero to Sir John Templeton (Solzhenitsyn won the Templeton Prize in 1983). The Oslo Freedom Forum, he told the

Templeton Report, was a fitting tribute to Sir John's belief in the power of noble individuals to advance the cause of freedom. Sargeant, who himself attended the Oslo conference, sees in the lives of these remarkable human rights leaders "perhaps the most persuasive evidence that one person's dedication and purpose can make a lasting difference."

Videos and transcripts of the speeches from the Oslo Freedom Forum can be found by visiting www.oslofreedomforum.com. The Human Rights Foundation plans to produce an anthology of selected writings of the speakers as well as a feature-length DVD of the conference.

NOTEBOOK

Purpose Prize Winner Honored by Obama

Robert Chambers, the founder of Bonnie CLAC (Car Loans and Counseling) and the winner of a 2006 Purpose Prize from Civic Ventures, spoke at the White House in June at the kick-off event for an Obama administration effort to find and support "the most promising nonprofits in America." The Purpose Prize, which receives major support from the Templeton Foundation, honors people age 60 and over who devise innovative ways of "taking on society's biggest challenges."



Robert Chambers at the White House.

A former car salesman who lamented the way that many dealerships prey on low-income buyers, Chambers launched Bonnie CLAC to provide low-interest car loans as well as financial counseling to the rural poor. The program helps its clients not only to buy a car but also to develop better credit. Since winning the Purpose Prize in 2006, Chambers has been working to extend the reach of his program. He has developed a business plan for expansion, hired a CEO, and received major support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Strategic Grant Partners.

In his remarks at the White House, Chambers described how the program came about and suggested that older Americans were a great untapped resource: "I was 57 when I started Bonnie CLAC, old enough to understand the injustice I saw and experienced enough to do something about it. It's important to note here today that social innovators come in all ages. Given the size of our baby boomer population, it's time to figure out how to build on all that experience, and to use it to solve our nation's most pressing social problems."

Science + Religion Today

With the help of a recent grant from the Templeton Foundation, *Science + Religion Today* has relaunched its website with a sleek new design (and a new web address: www.scienceandreligiontoday.com). Written by science journalist Heather Wax (former features editor of *Science & Spirit*) and Dan Messier (former books editor of *Science & Spirit*) and overseen by the physicist Karl Giberson, a well-known author on issues at the intersection of science and religion, the website brings together each weekday the top stories from a variety of sources, puts them in context, and gives readers the opportunity to join the discussion by offering their own opinions and ideas.

Science + Religion Today can be followed on both Facebook and Twitter. For more information about becoming a part of the

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T O D A Y

website's online community, write to heatherwax@scienceandreligiontoday.com.

**Please note that the Templeton Report will not be published in the month of August.*

For more information, write to communications@templeton.org.

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