2000

A statement delivered by

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THE PRESIDENT OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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Ladies and Gentlemen,
Distinguished Participants,

Allow me to welcome you all very cordially to the Czech Republic, to Prague and Prague Castle. Thank you for accepting the invitation to the FORUM 2000 conference — which is being held here and has been made possible especially thanks to the foundations sponsoring and organizing it.

First, if you allow me, I would like to say a few words about our country, about this city and this Castle. The Czech Lands, probably due mostly to their location in the centre of Central Europe, have, since time immemorial, been a crossroads of diverse power interests and currents of thought; it is certainly not a chance circumstance that in ancient ages, as well as in more recent times, a number of great wars have erupted in this particular location — and not infrequently also ended here, as for example in the Thirty Years' War and lately at the time of the Munich dictate, then during the Communist putsch of 1948 and at the attack by armies of the Warsaw Pact against our country in 1968. Events in our country were a test for all Europe, a warning to the continent, and a challenge to redefine its basic values and demonstrate coherently the amount of courage it was willing to exert to defend those values. Probably even more important than this political fate was what I would choose to call the spiritual record of our country. The East and the West, Catholicism and Protestantism, democracy and totalitarianism, republicanism and monarchist absolutism, mysticism and enlightenment, national subjugation and national blossoming, tolerance and chauvinism, awareness of global context side-by-side with provincialism and isolationism, Central Europeanism and a traditional deep interest in matters non-European, selfish and ignorant short-sightedness and astonishing historical vision — all have combined and clashed over the long decades and centuries in a very extraordinary manner.

An amazing specimen of what I have just said about our country bears the name Prague. This city has been, every so often in its history, a true crossroads of European spiritual trends — as in the period of Rudolf II, currently the theme of a large exhibition being held in Prague; this city has often been called magical, mysterious, enchanting, spellbinding, particularly because of its eventful and multi-layered history growing from the perpetual entwinement of the Czech, Jewish, German and Italian elements with various other European influences that has made an indelible mark on its appearance and permeated the atmosphere of the city.

The Castle, on whose premises we find ourselves today, is central and dominant to Prague, a city which — in my opinion — is more Central European and European than just Czech. With almost encyclopaedic consistency it has been a great witness to the history of the city and country, offering a lens-like, converging reflection of the past ages. It is, or rather for long centuries has been, also the centre of our life — both spiritual and cultural.

For all the reasons indicated above I feel that the Czech Republic, Prague and Prague

Castle are a most fitting location for the meeting which opens here today. Where el should wise people from all over the world meet to reflect together for a few days on th fate and future of our common civilization than in a place with such eventful history, place which had always felt with such sensitivity the threats looming over humankin and its culture, as well as the hopes that man may and must nourish?

Our conference follows a series of similar events organized over the years by th foundation established by Marion and Elie Wiesel, some of which I had the honour o attending; it also, however, has unique and individual features distinguishing it somewh from the mentioned series. I am hinting not only at the items on its agenda, not only the external framework of the conference and accompanying events, not only at ambition to establish a certain tradition, but mainly at the circle of its guests. Invitation to this conference have been sent out to about one hundred prominent personalities o public life, philosophers, political scientists, politicians, scientists, religious authoritie and intellectuals from all cultural regions or areas of civilization of the contemporar world. Of course, not all the invited have been able to attend. Nevertheless, I think tha you, who did find time to travel to Prague, are a truly brilliant sample of the people who, on this planet, are engaged in the most fundamental questions of its destiny.

Before I assume the part of a keen listener to your debate, I shall try to outline in a brief and indeed rather simplified, manner my personal expectations of this conference.

Humankind today is well aware of the varied spectrum of threats looming over its head. We do know that the number of people living on our planet is growing at a soaring rate and that within a relatively short time we can expect it to number tens of billions. We do know that it shall be almost impossible to feed so many people. We do know how the already-deep abyss separating the planet's poor and rich could deepen further, and dangerously, because of this rapid population growth. We do know how difficult it will be for people of various nationalities and cultures to coexist crowded so dramatically together; and we know how many different kinds of conflicts such a situation could lead to. It is also a commonly known fact that modern humankind has been destroying the environment on which its existence depends; that it is ever faster exhausting non-renewable sources of energy and other riches of this planet; that its activities are contributing to global warming, to the build-up of the greenhouse effect; to the enlargement of the holes in the ozone layer; that it is disturbing the balance of all ecosystems. We all know, too, about the danger into which humankind is hurling itself by developing, producing and proliferating nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction in general. And finally we all know about the current and the expected future rise of social problems, crime, drug abuse and various forms of human alienation and frustration in the event of further concentration of people in large agglomerations destroying natural human communities and bonds. Any one of us could certainly go on listing similar threats for a long time, describing them in more detail and in rich colours, explaining how deeply they are entwined; hundreds of books have been written about these threats, some have even become topics of expensive global summits.

I see a large, yet typical, paradox for our era in the fact that though contemporary humanity has been aware of these dangers, it does almost nothing to confront or avert

them. It is fascinating how preoccupied people are today with all kinds of catastrophic prognoses — is it not common for titles containing impressive evidence of the disasters into which we are tumbling headlong become bestsellers? — and how very little people take these into account in their everyday activities. For how many years now have these warning data been taught in schools and yet how small is the effect of this knowledge on human behaviour! Does not every schoolchild know today that the resources of this planet are limited and that if exhausted faster than recovered would mean we could not but be doomed? And still we continue in our ways and, moreover, do not even seem perturbed. Quite the contrary — rising production, and therefore also consumption, is felt as the main sign of success of a state, and that not only of poor states where such feelings could be justified, but also of the wealthy ones, cutting the branch on which they are sitting by their ideology of stupidly indefinite and senseless growth.

It seems to me that it is not, now, critical to point out again and again such horrors which may be lying in wait, unless our whole global civilization changes its essential direction. Today, the most important thing, in my view, is to study the reasons why humankind does nothing to avert the threats about which it knows so much and why it allows itself to be carried onward by some kind of perpetual motion — basically unaffected by self-awareness or a sense of future options and, as it seems, virtually incapable of being affected.

I believe and hope that our conference will touch this topic. Indeed, the prerequisite of any change for the better is first naming correctly the situation which needs to be changed and then analyzing its causes.

It would be unfair, of course, to deny the existence of numerous projects for the aversion of this danger or for its limitation as well as the fact that a lot has been done for the implementation of such projects. However, all attempts of this kind have one thing in common — they do not at all touch basic trends of development from which the threats I am speaking of sprout, but merely regulate their impact using technical or administrative instruments. A typical example of such instruments are legal acts, ordinances or international treaties stipulating how much toxic matter this or that product may contain or how much toxic waste this or that plant may discharge into the environment. I am not criticizing this type of standards or safeguards against any type of threat, quite the opposite: I am glad that something like this is being done at all. I only claim that these are technical tricks reducing the unfavourable impact of other techniques — without, however, such regulatory activity having any effect on the substance of the matter.

What then is the substance of the matter? What indeed could change the tendencies of today's civilization? What could really stop the perpetual motion which we have not been able to control so far?

It is my deep conviction that the only option is for something to change in the sphere of the spirit, in the sphere of human conscience, in the actual attitude of man towards the world and his understanding of himself and his place in the overall order of existence. It cannot suffice to invent new machines, new regulations, new institutions.

it is necessary to understand differently and more perfectly the true purpose of our existence on this Earth and of our deeds. Only such new understanding will allow the development of new models of behaviour, new scales of values and life objectives, and through this means finally attach a new spirit and new meaning also to the specific regulations, treaties and institutions.

In short: it appears to me that it would be better to start from the head rather than the tail.

I would welcome it, of course, to hear whether you share this conviction of mine or perhaps, relying on your life experience, your knowledge and your beliefs or faith, what further and more specific points you would like to add to this topic.

One of the reasons I believe that a true and essential turn for the better can derive only from changes in the sphere of the spirit is because of an observation of mine. Whenever I encounter any kind of deeper civilization problem anywhere in the world — be it logging of rain forests, ethnic or religious intolerance or the brutal destruction of the cultural landscape which had taken centuries to develop — then somewhere at the end of the long chain of causes that gave rise to the problem at issue I always find one and the same reason: a lack of accountability to the world and responsibility for it.

There are countless types of responsibility, perceived as either more or less pressing, many of which vary naturally among individuals. We feel responsible to ourselves or for ourselves, for our health, our performance, our welfare; we feel responsible for our families, our companies, our communities, our professions, political parties, churches, regions, nations or countries; and somewhere in the background of all these feelings of responsibility there is, in every one of us, a small feeling of responsibility for the world as a whole and for its future; do we not all feel that the world does not end at the moment of our death and that it is wrong to act as if we do not care if the floods come after we are gone. Nevertheless, it seems to me that this last and deepest responsibility, that is responsibility for the world, is very low for a number of reasons and is actually dangerously low against the background of the fact that the world today is a more interlinked place than ever before in history and that we are *de facto* living one global destiny and that almost anything that happens anywhere in the world may in one way or another affect the lives of us all.

And yet we live in a world which seems to legitimize very strongly all kinds of possible and impossible particular interests, which however seems unable to legitimize properly the universal interests, those which reach beyond the framework of the family, company, party, state or current generation. That is namely those interests which could be expected to dominate in today's globally networked world and one threatened by multiple civilizations. Those who pursue such interests — not superficially and only verbally, but truly sincerely — are today being pushed more obviously to the margins of society as idealists standing apart from the real state of affairs.

The current world is dominated by several great religious systems whose differences seem to be coming to the fore with increasing perspicuity and actually forming the

background to many real or potential political and armed conflicts in the present and future. In my opinion this fact which is attracting, understandably, the concerned attention of all observers conceals somewhat a considerably more substantial circumstance — the contemporary global civilization inside which the tension within the areas of the individual religion is taking place is indeed in essence a deeply atheistic one. Indeed, it is to date the first atheistic civilization in the history of humankind. Simultaneously, it is the first civilization which embraces the whole planet.

The reason why I am stressing this fact namely at this moment is, I hope, obvious: the atheistic nature of this civilization coincides deeply, I believe, with the hypertrophic pursuit of individual interests and individual responsibilities together with the crisis of global responsibilities.

Could the fact that humanity thinks only within the limits of what lies in its field of vision and is incapable of remembering also what lies beyond, whether in the temporal or spatial sense, not be the result of loss of metaphysical certitude, vanishing points and horizons? Could not the whole nature of the current civilization — with its shortsightedness, with its proud emphasis on the human individual as the crown of all creation and its master and with its boundless trust in humanity's ability to embrace the Universe by rational cognition, could it not all be but the natural manifestation of a phenomenon which, in simple terms, amounts to the loss of God? Or more specifically: the loss of respect to the order of existence of which we are not the creators but mere components, to the mysterious inherent meaning or spirit which does possess this order, to its memory capable of not only recording that part of our deeds concealed from others but of recording it for eternity, that is of evaluating our deeds so as to say from the point of view of eternity? Could it not be that the issue is a crisis of respect for the moral order extended to us from above, or simply a crisis of respect for any kind of authority higher than our own earthly being, with its material and thoroughly ephemeral earthly interests? Succinctly, could not the crisis of responsibility and accountability for the world as a whole and for its future be but the logical consequence of the modern conception of the world as a complex of phenomena controlled by certain scientifically identifiable laws, formulated for God-knows- what purpose — that is, a conception which does not question the meaning of existence and renounces any kind of metaphysics or any kind of its own metaphysical roots?

I have been thinking about the basic questions and paradoxes of the contemporary civilization for many years and in recent times I have even had the opportunity of encountering different aspects of these issues in various countries of all continents. And without my view being burdened *a priori* by any kind of paradigm, I become repeatedly and increasingly convinced of the validity of that which I have just outlined. It is for this reason that I shall be especially interested in the views of this assembly of wise people, to see how they either refute, or on the other hand supplement my conviction.

To put it simply: amongst other things, I expect this conference to give me and many others an answer to whether I am right or mistaken when I think what I am thinking — that the crisis of the so much-needed global responsibility is in principle due to the fact that we have lost the certainty that the Universe, nature, existence and our lives are the work of creation guided by a definite intention, that it has a definite meaning and follows a definite purpose, and together with this certainty of course also all and every humility

towards what reaches beyond us and surrounds us. This loss is of course accompa by the loss of the feeling that whatever we do must be subjected to the regard for higher order of which we are part and to the respect for its authority in whose field vision every one of us is permanently present.

I have mentioned that the image of today's world reflects the predominance of seve great religious systems which are playing an increasingly important role — or rather whose mutual "otherness" seems to be becoming increasingly important, and that ma people actually perceive a conflict between these different religious worlds as one of s threats mankind will encounter the future.

Yes, after the fall of the colonial system and the end of the bipolar division of the world and due to the population boom and the growing self-confidence and influence various countries and continents lying outside the limits of the hitherto dominant Eur American civilization sphere, humankind is actually entering a world whose characteristic features are multipolarity and multiculturalism.

It would seem so far that the more tied the various civilization, cultural and religious groups are by the bonds of a single global civilization - exerting unavoidably a unifying influence — the more they try to confront such grip by emphasizing their sovereignty, inalienable identity, specificity, or simply things by which they differ from the circle of the other groups. As if one lived in an epoch of accentuated spiritual, religious and cultural *"otherness"*. This growing accent is indeed another large threat to this world.

But how to restore in the human mind a shared attitude to what is above if people everywhere have a different image of that which is above and everywhere feel the need to stress that *"otherness"*? Is there any sense in trying to turn the human mind to the heavens when such a turn would only aggravate the conflict among our various deities?

I am not, of course, an expert on various religions, but from all that I know about the main ones, learning about them over the time and in direct contact with them, I have gained the indelible impression that they have much more in common than they admit or are willing to admit. Starting from the basic point of departure — that is, that the world and our existence here are not a freak chance having little meaning but are part of a mysterious, yet integral, act whose sources, direction and purpose are difficult for us to perceive in their entirety — to the large complex of moral imperatives which the act applies in addressing us — all this, surprisingly, seems to unite the various religious systems while the specific aspects of their traditions, accents, liturgies and interpretations remain, in my view, an immensely important, but not dominant, factor. What, on the other hand, I think does dominate is the similarity in what the various religions ask of us, as human beings, or how they perceive us.

The last but perhaps most important question I would like to ask is, whether the way out of the current bleak situation could not be found in the actual search for what unites the various religions and cultures, in the search for common sources, principles, certitudes, aspirations and imperatives, a purpose-minded search; and then, applying means adequate to the needs of our time, to cultivate all matters of human coexistence and

endeavour as well as the treatment of the planet on which it is our destiny to live, and to suffuse it all with the spirit of what I wish to call, with your permission, the common spiritual and moral minimum.

Do you suppose this might be a way to stop that blind perpetual motion dragging us into hell, or would it seem to you to be unrealistic and naïve? Would you presume that such general and universal recovery of the human spirit and human responsibility for the world, such — as I once called it — "existential revolution" could be provoked only by some unprecedented shock or disaster, or is it within the power of wise people to bring them about by their own will and by joining their forces without the need for any appalling impulse from the outside? Would you presume that convincing words of wise people would simply be enough to achieve what has been described or would we need, like in the past, charismatic prophets or modern messiahs or even some kind of historical miracle?

Distinguished Friends,

I would be very surprised if any two of you give an identical answer to the several very general questions which I have posed here. It is not, however, our purpose to reach an agreement on something of neutral content, or on a compromise, and then issue that as a joint manifesto nobody would bother to read because it is too vague. We can bravely leave that procedure to official conferences and summits. The agenda of this assembly is different: an opportunity for its participants — and they are truly a varied group — to express, in the most original and interesting way possible, their own views of the issues which are undoubtedly of concern to us all, and to turn the mutual exchange and confrontation of these views into a true forum.

A forum as space where people reflect on matters concerning everybody and discuss them.

Thank you for your attention and I wish us all a successful meeting. I also wish you a pleasant stay in Prague and hope you will absorb some of its special atmosphere — let it be an enrichment for you, at least to the same degree as your presence here and the ideas you voice enrich my fellow citizens.