

Speech by: **Mrs. Valgerd Svarstad Haugland**  
Minister of Culture and Church Affairs, Norway

Place: Alexandria Opening speech at the  
Beacon for Freedom of Expression Conference

Date: May 19<sup>th</sup> 2003

**THE BEACON FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION DATABASE  
A GIFT FROM NORWAY  
DEDICATED TO THE NEW BIBLIOTHECA ALEXANDRINA**

Excellencies:

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Alexandria – the name has a sound of its own in the ears of every scholar in this world. In academic spheres the name Alexandria represents one of the main sources of thought and knowledge and has been an inspiration for human development for centuries.

Now we are in the city of Alexandria.

Alexandria, founded more than 300 years B.C. by Alexander the Great, was an economic and a political power in the region. At the same time it was, with no doubt, the most important center for philosophy and science. Situated by the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, in an oasis at the mouth of the river Nile it became a link between East and West and a great commercial city. This turned Alexandria into one of the most beautiful cities in the western world, known for its architecture and art. Famous were also the royal palace, the temples, the theatres and the parks. On the island of Pharos was the widely known lighthouse, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. At the end of the fourth century BC, Ptolemy Soter ordered to “collect all books in the world” in this exceptional city of Alexandria.

We know the history of the lighthouse. They were both destroyed. The lighthouse of Pharos had been as a leading star for navigation for seafarers, the library a leading star for navigation for human thought.

Now the library is reconstructed, and was officially opened last October. The new Library of Alexandria will attempt to build a sum of knowledge embracing “the writings of all peoples.” According to Article 1 in the Egyptian law from 2001 governing the library, it is to be “an Egyptian center of cultural radiance, a beacon for taught, culture and science, to encompass the product of the human mind in cultures old and new in all languages”.

I would like you all to reflect for a moment on this wording. The new library of Alexandria cannot but have an official aim of this magnitude. What we encounter here is the essential meaning of any decent library, namely man’s free access to free expressions of the thoughts of others, whenever, wherever and however these thoughts are expressed.

It will be privilege in a moment to present the Norwegian gift to the new library of Alexandria, the database Beacon for Freedom of Expression, a unique web-based reference catalogue on censored writings past and present. My hope is that this database will be an amplification of what I just mentioned should be the intrinsic idea of any library; Free access to free expressions of the thoughts of others. With its historical and symbolical significance, it seems only appropriate that Bibliotheca Alexandrina should house such a reference catalogue. Thus, I feel that presenting the database to the library is an important event, pointing towards the future.

The database Beacon for Freedom Expression is aimed at facilitating dialogue between the world’s cultures on the significance of freedom of expression and free access to information as vital parts of democracy and peace worldwide. The database is a pioneering project in terms of its structure and content. It is divided into the two parts. The first contains a global, bibliographical reference catalogue of books and newspapers censored by government authorities past and present on political, religious or moral grounds. The second part lists literature on censorship and freedom of expression. The database is updated continuously and currently contains more than 55 000 bibliographical references. The Beacon for Freedom of Expression therefore represents a steadily growing electronic monument to all the writers, books and newspapers that have been censored throughout history. A more detailed description is available in the brochure issued for this event.

Over the last fifty years we have grown familiar with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, at least with the fundamental idea of such rights. Article 19 in the Declaration states that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

In recent years voices have been raised against the universal claim of such rights. It has been said that these rights reflect the values of only parts of the world's population. But, alas; whoever contents the universality of the right to freedom of opinion and expression is in the very moment of saying it, making explicit use of exactly this right. Thus they presuppose what they would try to undermine: The right to free expression of thoughts- whatever that may be.

But what thoughts are worthy of expression? Is that a relevant question? Is the principle of freedom of expression in itself an expression of total normative relativity, suggesting that anything goes? What may be justifications of exceptions from the principle of freedom of expression? And how can the principle itself be justified?

It seems reasonable to give both universal and contextual justifications of freedom of expression. In my opinion there are three important principles that together make up a strong line of reasoning for the universality of the principle of freedom of expression. These are truth, autonomy and democracy. A person trusted with the right to freely express his opinions, will learn to respect other people's points of view, and will thus learn to correct his own views, and will be able to partake in the society with truthful, conscientious opinions.

People used to reflecting upon values, standards and alternative conceptions are of vital importance to the further development of the society. This goes both for political development and for development of knowledge and understanding. The freedom to gather information, the freedom of public expression of opinion and then free exchange of ideas are the primary constituents of democracy. The society at large cannot but benefit from

allowing its people freely to make full use of their faculties in openness and trust.

To me, these principles condition each other, and provide a universal justification of the freedom of expression. It is part of the rock bottom of human values, which to me can never be compromised or made relative to other considerations neither for allowing nor limiting the freedom of expression. I feel confident that any general justification of freedom of expression concords with general ideas of what it is to be a human being.

A universal line of reasoning for freedom of expression should be supplemented by arguments rooted in the context of the society where freedom of expression is being implemented. These conditions vary with time and place, and the defense for freedom of expression will be shaped accordingly in the individual nation's constitution. In a society with well-developed public institutions, freedom of expression can encourage truth, democracy and exchange of ideas. Mature, enlightened citizens develop their understanding for when to say what, according to what benefits society in a broader context.

A leading Norwegian poet, Ludvig Holberg, in his memories some two hundred and fifty years ago, wrote, "The more cultivation a people possess, the more freedom they grant their poets." At about the same time, the French poet Voltaire said, "I disagree with all you say, but are willing to die for your right to say it."

However. I think we all agree that there are limits to how violent, sexist, insulting and disrespectful utterances may be before we deem them inadequate for the development of our selves and not beneficial to future generations.

It is the deepest feeling of gratitude and pride that I can present to the new Library of Alexandria the database Beacon for Freedom of Expression. I sincerely hope the database will help make the library: a beacon for thought, culture and science, to encompass the product of the human mind in cultures old and new in all languages", and that the wondrous lighthouse be restored symbolically as a beacon for the freedom of expression.

After the handing over of the database to the library, follow-up has been ensured until the end of 2005 by an International Steering Committee. The follow-up activities will be financed by the Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Church Affairs until the end of 2005.

Their Majesties King Harald the 5th and Queen Sonia of Norway start their state visit to the kingdom of Belgium tomorrow, May the 20<sup>th</sup>. An item on the official program is opening of an exposition dedicated to Bibliotheca Alexandrina at the Royal Library of Brussels. A copy of the database will be presented as a symbolic gift to the Royal Library.

There are a number of people and institutions to be thanked today. First, I would very much like to thank Her Excellency Mrs. Suzanne Mubarak, Chair of the Board of Trustees, and her invaluable efforts for the Library.

And dear doctor Ismail Serageldin, director general of the Library, I thank you wholeheartedly for the appreciation you have shown for the database we present to your library. We are particularly pleased that you and your dedicated staff have shown such an interest in the database and its management and future development. I would also like to thank Mrs. Laila Dowidar for the work laid down in planning and successfully arranging this conference and seminars.

Among all the institutions involved in the project, I would like to thank-

- The International Freedom of Expression exchange Clearing House (IFEX)
- The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA)
- UNESCO and The United Library in Geneva
- All other international organizations and national libraries that have contributed in the project
- Ravn Webvevet, web-designer for the database.

I would also like to thank the initiators of the database-

- The former Norwegian Forum for Freedom of Expression, whose role is carried on by The Norwegian Library Association.

Also-

- The Institute for Human Rights at the University of Oslo
- The Faculty of Journalism, Library and Information Science at Oslo University College
- The National Library of Norway.

There are several more to thank, but there is not enough time to mention them all. However, it is my pleasure particularly to thank the project administrator, Mrs. Mette Newth, without whose everlasting enthusiasm the database would never have materialized.

Doctor Serageldin, please accept this gift from Norway, the database Beacon for Freedom of Expression.