

A reflection on humanism in the 21st century

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The Director-General of UNESCO has proposed to respond to the challenges of our times through the lens of a New Humanism for the 21st century. Why do we need a New Humanism? The ideals of peace, tolerance and dialogue, the principles inscribed in the United Nations Charter, the Constitution of UNESCO or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all stem from humanistic values which can be identified throughout human history on all continents. They also form the basis for international cooperation as embodied in such global agendas as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) or the Education For All (EFA) goals.

Humanism is UNESCO's moral and intellectual DNA. The evolutionary philosophy of UNESCO embraces a profound optimism vis-à-vis the notions of human development and progress. In an era when the human population has reached 7 billion individuals, the belief that humanity can and does progress is an inspiration. UNESCO seeks to catalyze an international reflection on how individuals, civil societies and governments can holistically address the challenges raised by the current diverse crises.

At the bottom of all this turmoil, there is, in the perspective of UNESCO, one crisis, expressing our difficulties to materialize the humanistic values that should inspire political and normative frameworks allowing for the dissemination of a culture of peace and the principles of sustainable development. These contemporary ideals resonate with the very existence of the United Nations and UNESCO, which were founded to "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" and "to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom" (Charter of the United Nations). While peace and prosperity are often presented as separate objectives, it must be recognized that, in truth, they are interconnected: there can be no peace when poverty is still the daily prison of billions of persons, many of them women and children; likewise, there can be no prosperity when humanity has engaged in a veritable war on nature that will make it impossible for future generations to satisfy their needs. Thus, a culture of peace and sustainable development are two sides of the same coin – and humanism in the 21st is that coin.

In UNESCO's view, humanism is not a local response to local problems – it is a resource for cooperative action in a global context. In a constantly evolving world, humanism needs to renew itself constantly, adapting universal values of peace, tolerance, respect for diversity and gender equality, to the requirements of our time. In this sense, the new humanism envisaged by UNESCO is not a repetition of the past – it is a future-oriented humanism.

The new humanism seeks to help people create their own future. This requires participation and inclusion of all, as well as cultural and intellectual cooperation in a global community fully aware of the transformative power of education, science and culture. It is indeed imperative that every human being has access to a quality education as well as the benefits of science and the capacity to participate in the social and cultural life of his or her community, either at the local or at the global level. Humanism today should be understood by all – governments and civil society – as a holistic strategy based on dialogue, solidarity and creativity. Dialogue creates environments that facilitate

respect for human rights, which are universal, and cultural diversity as well as the practice of non-violence and tolerance.

This is the kind of humanism that inspired the founders of UNESCO when they wrote in the Constitution “that ignorance of each other’s ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind, of that suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into war.” Dialogue is the path away from ignorance and mistrust. But, to achieve true mutual understanding, one key feature must be insisted upon: creativity. When people and cultures engage in open and inclusive dialogue, they create the world anew. In that light, it is UNESCO’s responsibility to establish the conditions for an ongoing creative dialogue of cultures, assuming that every culture has humanist dimensions intrinsic to it that it can share with other cultures. Humanism in the 21st century will take the shape of one immense civilizational river fed by incalculable cultural tributaries.

East, West, North and South: we need to create the conditions for sustainable and durable exchanges between all the parts of the world, which is involved in unprecedented processes of globalization, notably through trade and communications whereby dialogue is bound to take new meanings, especially with the rise of social networks. The current trends of globalization are creating new realities – and we need to learn how to cope with them. We are still searching for the right *modus vivendi* in this era of globalization.

It is the conviction of UNESCO that a future-oriented humanism has the potential to create a more democratic and humane world where the values of human dignity and human rights, of equal access to education and culture, and of equality of men and women will underpin all economic and political considerations. Key questions remain to be asked.

How can we best characterize a ‘New Humanism’ for the 21st Century? What are the principles, values and norms which should guide it? How would the New Humanism be concretized? What should the role of UNESCO and of the other international governmental and non-governmental organizations in this process? What should be the role of society at large, of the media, of the private sector? What are the opportunities in education, the sciences, culture and communication where new humanist approaches can be developed?

Given its five functions – laboratory of idea, clearing house, standard-setter, capacity-builder and catalyst for international cooperation – it falls under UNESCO’s mandate to explore new or renewed ideas, values, attitudes, behaviours and models with which to address the challenges faced by the international community and the public at large. In this spirit, UNESCO is undertaking a foresight project dedicated to the New Humanism with the aim of stimulating the international debate on the values underpinning humanism in the 21st century and on strategic models to concretize this holistic and pluralist approach so as to create the conditions for a culture of peace and dialogue.