



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

Organisation  
des Nations Unies  
pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture

Organización  
de las Naciones Unidas  
para la Educación,  
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
вопросам образования,  
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

**Address by Irina Bokova,**

**Director-General of UNESCO**

**on the occasion of the awarding of an honorary degree by the University  
of Foreigners of Perugia**

**Perugia, Italy, 15 February, 2016**

Minister of Education, Universities and Research, Ms Stefania Giannini,

Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, M. Mario Giro,

Under-secretary for cultural heritage, Ms Borletti Buitoni,

Rector Professor Giovanni Paciullo,

President of Umbria, Ms Catuscia Marini,

Professor Lucio Ubertini,

Mr Mayor, Andrea Romizi,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am deeply grateful to the *Università per stranieri di Perugia* for this invitation.

It is a great pleasure to be here with you today on this joyous occasion.

I am honoured to receive an honorary degree in International Relations and Development Cooperation from your great University.

I believe UNESCO and this University have a lot in common, and we share the same passion for culture, with so many artists, actors and filmmakers having studied here, from Helmut Berger to Arthur Penn, as well as Michaëlle Jean, Secretary General of the Francophonie, former UNESCO Special Envoy for Haiti.

I see this *Università per stranieri di Perugia* as a symbol of the vitality and openness of this city.

Perugia is rooted in the history and heritage of ancient Etruscan and Roman culture, hosting masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance, the legacy of Perugino, home to one of Europe's oldest university...

... at the same time, Perugia is open to the world, at the cutting edge of research, nurturing the energy of knowledge and culture and young women and men, for the benefit of all.

I believe this resonates with the core mandate of UNESCO, and being here today is a strong reminder of the values we share.

This region is home to some of Italy's most treasured cultural heritage sites -- including the stunning *Assisi, Basilica of San Francesco and Other Franciscan Sites*, inscribed on the World Heritage List in recognition of their outstanding universal value.

Historic Italian cities, with their palazzos and public squares, embodied in Siena, Firenze, Venezia, Roma, and Perugia in particular, with the *Piazza IV Novembre and the Fontana Maggiore* by the great Pisano, carry special meaning in the history of Europe, in the history of all humanity.

They are a reminder of our shared responsibility to safeguard heritage.

They bear witness to the power of culture and heritage to bring people together, in times of joy and celebration, as well as in times of trial and uncertainty, when people come together in public spaces to discuss, reflect and decide on public matters.

This is the core message of World Heritage.

Italy is home to 51 World Heritage Sites, and has shown its determination to safeguard and promote all of these for future generations.

We see the same engagement in the work of many Italian professionals, and this is an inspiration to professional associations across the world and for UNESCO.

Despite enormous challenges, we have seen great strides in heritage conservation made at such sites as Venice and Pompeii.

These efforts and experiences are beneficial for Italy and for all other countries.

They provide a precious source of knowledge on a wide range of conservation issues.

From projects in Herat and Bamiyan in Afghanistan, to the conservation of sites and museums exposed to severe threats in Iraq and Libya, to capacity-building initiatives in Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific -- Italy is sharing its unique experience and expertise with the world.

I wish to commend the overall championship of Italy at UNESCO -- among UNESCO's strongest partners, home to the *World Water Assessment Programme*, a leading initiative led by UNESCO in Perugia, as well as the *International Centre for Theoretical Physics*, in Trieste, and so many other institutions dedicated to the advancement of sciences and knowledge, and I would like to commend Her Excellency Ambassador Lomonaco, Permanent Delegate of Italy to UNESCO for pioneering this effort.

Let me also commend you Mme Minister Giannini for your efforts in leveraging the power of universities and higher education institutions for promoting dialogue and consolidating peace processes through inter-university cooperation between Italy and universities in the Arab region and the Mediterranean

This afternoon, I will participate in a high level meeting on the cooperation between UNESCO and Italy on water issues, and more particularly on the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals -- where water management plays such an important role, and this calls for a deeper commitment and support for water institutions, in Italy notably.

Our cooperation is based on the same passion for culture and reason against ignorance and violence.

We need this commitment more than ever today, in a world that is increasingly turbulent, where conflicts are changing shape, when we see the rise of violent extremism.

We see culture and heritage under attack.

We see the persecution of people on ethnic cultural and religious grounds.

We see the intentional destruction of irreplaceable landmarks -- from the ancient Nineveh to the archaeological site of Palmyra.

This includes organised looting for illicit trafficking, which is financing terrorism and criminal activities.

At a deeper level, we see a new global struggle for hearts and minds, targeting primarily young people, featuring coordinated attacks against the symbols and institutions of culture and I would say even more broadly attacks against free thinking – schools are destroyed, universities are bombed, to impose a sectarian vision of religion.

These attacks on people, on heritage and on minds, are part of the same deliberate strategy.

Violent extremists know culture brings people together – culture enlightens – they know the power of heritage, architecture and living traditions to unite, to inspire.

They attack heritage, because they fear the power of history to de-legitimise their claims.

This calls for responses that go beyond the military and security approach.

When culture is on the frontline of conflicts of such ideological nature, targeted and weaponized in a new information war, the power of culture to heal and to unite should be at the forefront of peace building.

This is what I wish to explore with you today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Culture has often been the victim of war -- as collateral damage, from direct targeting, from looting, in Ancient Egypt, during the Roman Empire.

More recently, we need only recall the conflicts in Southeast Europe, which saw the deliberate destruction of the Old Bridge of Mostar.

We all remember the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, in Afghanistan in 2001.

But what we see today is new in scale and nature, and this is why I consider this as "cultural cleansing".

Never before in recent history have we seen such systematic attacks against cultural heritage and diversity, as a tactic of war, to intimidate populations, disseminate hatred.

Your country knows from history a number of iconic cities that have been burnt, destroyed and levelled.

But even when precious cultural symbols and monuments have been attacked, including in the war between Etruscan Perugia and the Roman Republic, others have been preserved, even as trophies, kept by victors to highlight their success.

This city was burnt by the troops of Octavius, but the temples of Vulcan and Juno remained untouched.

Today, the ancient city of Palmyra, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is being systematically destroyed, day by day.

The museum of Mosul has been vandalised.

Nimrud has been dynamited.

These destructions, according to the *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*, are war crimes.

In Syria, all six World Heritage sites have been damaged by fighting.

The Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo has become a battlefield.

60 percent of the Ancient City of Aleppo has been destroyed.

In Libya, at least eight religious sites have been damaged or destroyed.

Across the region, illegal excavations have taken on industrial scale, financing violent extremism, making the destruction of heritage an integral part of a strategy of terror.

It has not always been easy for UNESCO to advocate for the protection of heritage, while hundreds of thousands of people are dying and millions more are suffering.

So I wish to be very clear.

We should all be concerned by the destruction of heritage, because it reveals the true nature of the challenge we face.

The destruction of culture shows that violent extremists do not seek only to kill and seize control of a territory.

By destroying culture, violent extremists are declaring that their objective is the complete annihilation of the Other – and this intent has always been the mark of a genocidal project.

Violent extremists do not choose between culture and people – they attack and destroy both – and we need to defend both.

Following the destruction of the Deir Mar Elia in Mosul, one of Iraq's most ancient Christian monasteries, Father Paul Thabit Habib from Erbil said:

*"We see this as an attempt to expel us from Iraq, eliminating and finishing our existence in this land."*

Iraq's Christian population has dropped from 1.3 million in 2000 to 300,000 today.

This shows how the destruction of heritage is inseparable from the persecution of people.

We must be clear -- this is not limited to a specific region or a specific community, in this particular case the Christian community – recent terrorist attacks across the world remind us that violence recognises no borders.

This is why the protection of culture is much more than a cultural issue.

It is a security issue and humanitarian imperative, it is a civilizational choice.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When cultural diversity is under threat, we can fight back.

No one is born a violent extremist.

Violent extremists are made, they are fuelled by hatred and sectarian approaches

In response, we can harness the power of culture and education as a force of resilience, as a counter-narrative to defeat extremism – as an antidote to radicalization.

Quality education is in itself the best intellectual self-defence against hatred, building on respect for cultural diversity and human rights.

To defeat violent extremism in the longer term, we know 'hard power' will not be enough – we need to win the battle of ideas.

This echoes with UNESCO's core principles – expressed in the opening lines of our constitution:

*“It is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed.”*

This is why I believe each and every one of us has a duty to share the history of heritage, in private and in public, on twitter, Facebook and on all platforms, in the media and in universities, to explain why heritage matters, to share the values of peace and dialogue.

In the short term, we must act quickly and firmly.

UNESCO is acting across the board.

We are leading the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural objects, to curb the financing of terrorism, to halt the disintegration of Iraqi and Syrian Identity.

One year ago, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2199 broke new ground, banning cultural trade from Iraq and Syria.

This has been strengthened recently by Resolution 2253, focusing on cooperation with the art market.

This is a major step forward, linking cultural issues and security matters, building on UNESCO's 1970 Convention against Illicit Trafficking.

UNESCO is working with all partners, including INTERPOL, the United Nations Office against Drugs and Crime, the World Customs Organization, to support Governments, build capacities, deepen information-sharing.

Italy has taken the lead in promoting, within UNESCO, a new and more effective strategy to tackle the challenge.

And I remember the very strong speech you made, Vice Minister Giro, in Firenze, at the world cultural forum in 2014 organized by Italy and UNESCO in the Palazzo



Vecchio, when you spoke about humanism, about culture as a bridge between the past and the future.

This has been critical to raise awareness on these issues and it resulted in important decisions by our General Conference last year, including a new strategy to protect culture under attack, endorsed by all Member States.

Italy is leading implementation of this strategy, with a national Task Force devoted to fighting against illicit trafficking of cultural property, under the umbrella of the Unite4Heritage global coalition I launched last year.

Tomorrow, in Rome, I will be with Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr Gentiloni, to sign the agreement establishing this Task Force, bringing together cultural experts and security forces – to intervene in situations of emergencies, and I hope this initiative will inspire other countries.

UNESCO is supporting the training of armed forces – we are sharing precise coordinates of Heritage Sites, to prevent them from being targeted under the provision of the *1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property during Armed Conflict*.

Today, in Iraq and Syria, ordinary citizens and museum professionals are risking their lives to protect their culture.

They need our support – UNESCO is leading action across the region to build capacity in preventive conservation, emergency risk management, inventories.

We must bolster international cooperation across the board.

We have positive examples to build on.

On 26 September, 2015, the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Ms Fatou Bensouda, and the authorities of Mali and Niger, transferred the first suspect accused of such war crimes in Timbuktu, Mali.

This case breaks new ground – to put an end to the impunity of such crimes.

UNESCO helped save the temples of Nubia, in Egypt.

UNESCO rebuilt the bridge of Mostar, in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In 2012, violent extremists destroyed the millennial mausoleums of Timbuktu.

In 2013, I was in Timbuktu with the President of France and I promised UNESCO would rebuild the mausoleums.

Last year, in July 2015, I returned to Timbuktu, to celebrate the reconstruction of the 14 mausoleums, with local communities and it matters for reconciliation and national unity.

Last week, for the first time in 900 years, a consecration ceremony was held to mark the rebirth of the city.

This is our response to violent extremism.

Let me say how honoured I am to receive this Laurea Honoris Causa from this noble institution of the University of Perugia.

Here, in the city of Perugia, I am reminded of the beauty and power of so many masterpieces of human ingenuity, of how talented people can inspire and nurture other talented people, with Perugino learning from Piero Della Francesca, and then teaching Rafaelo – there can be no doubt that the forces of beauty and hope are greater and stronger than the forces of darkness and despair.

This is proof that culture can rise above hatred.

This is the narrative we need to share.

I count on you all to stand united for heritage.

Thank you.