

# THE ROAD TO 1945

by CHIKH BÉKRI

Extract from *The UNESCO Courier*, November 1995

**The long-cherished idea of creating peace in the minds of men took form in the watershed year of 1945.**

UNESCO did not spring forth fully armed, like Athene from the head of Zeus, out of the smoking ruins of London one foggy day in November 1945. As British Prime Minister Clement Attlee said at the opening session of the London conference for the establishment of UNESCO, the idea of an intellectual organization to promote co-operation among the nations and serve the cause of mutual understanding between the peoples had been around since the French Revolution or even earlier.

The relationship between culture and peace has not always been obvious, however. It was only with the gradual establishment of democracy in the nineteenth century and the assumption of responsibility for public education by the state that the new concepts of the right to knowledge, equality of opportunity and education for all emerged.

## THE PIONEERS

In the late nineteenth century the Dutch educationist Herman Molkenboer wrote, with touching naivety, that "School is therefore the power to which the future belongs and teachers are the factors whose joint action should bring the fruits of the moral order in the universe to maturity", and the German educator Kurnig drew up a plan for peace through education.

These forerunners often found themselves swimming against the tide, without resources or supporters. At the beginning of the twentieth century they were drawn largely from associations of intellectuals and feminists. They learned to frequent the corridors of power and to lobby politicians. After the First World War, the Belgians Henri Lafontaine and Paul Otlet, who had founded the Union of International Organizations in 1910, tried without success to persuade the politicians to create an international organization of intellectual workers. Fannie Fern Andrews, who established the American School Peace League in 1908, later worked on a project for an "International Education Bureau".

But these pioneers of culture for the sake of peace could not make themselves heard. Preparation for war was part of the training of the citizen, i.e. of culture, which, like education, remained the exclusive preserve of the state. The victors of the war made the vanquished pay dearly for their defeat, while the latter dreamed only of revenge, and thus the rise of nationalism was exacerbated by the confidence that comes from victory and the resentments that rise from defeat. The maxim "Let him who desires peace prepare for war" was quoted as a self-evident truth.

At that time, few countries paid any attention to intellectual co-operation, which was not regarded as an important, or even a useful, factor in international relations. Some governments even regarded this form of

international co-operation as suspect. The Covenant of the League of Nations is silent on the subject of culture. Peace remained the preserve of politicians, diplomats and, in the last resort, the military.

### **PEACE IN THE MINDS OF MEN**

The Second World War was to change this situation and to win acceptance for the idea, set forth in UNESCO's constitution, that "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed", that "a peace based exclusively upon the political and economic arrangements of governments would not be a peace which could secure the unanimous, lasting and sincere support of the peoples of the world", and that "the peace must therefore be founded, if it is not to fail, upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind."

Most of the speeches made at UNESCO's founding conference took up this theme. The general atmosphere in London was neither one of rejoicing in victory over the forces of evil nor even one of relief at awakening from a nightmare but rather reflective and subdued. As Jaime Torres Bodet, who headed the Mexican delegation and was later to become UNESCO's second Director-General, put it, "the gratification of triumph would be madness if we were to neglect the immediate need of finding some guarantee against the recurrence of such perils". The fear of a war that would annihilate human life on earth was in everyone's mind, and Archibald MacLeish, the leader of the United States delegation gave direct expression to it when he told the delegates: "We must choose to live together or we must choose, quite literally, not to live."

### **CULTURE FOR PEACE**

Tribute was also unanimously paid to the courage shown and the sacrifices made by intellectuals and to their decisive contribution to the triumph of democracy. In her opening address, British Minister of Education Ellen Wilkinson, who was President of the Conference, referred to the part intellectuals had played in these words: "In every land which the totalitarians overran, it was the intellectual who was picked out first to face the firing squad - teacher, priest, professor. The men who meant to rule the world knew that first they must kill those who tried to keep thought free".

The founding fathers also knew that culture in itself was not enough to guarantee peace. The totalitarian ideologies had been thought out by philosophers before being put into practice by politicians, and the deadliest weapons - whose devastating effects conference delegates could see for themselves in London - had been devised and developed by scientists before being used by the military.

Knowledge cannot do without morality. War, even more than a matter of armies, is a matter of ideologies. As Léon Blum, Associate President of the Conference, said, the war "has shown us how education, culture (in the strict sense) and science itself may be distorted against the common interests of humanity..... Expansion and perfecting (them) are therefore not enough. These institutions must be steered in the direction of that 'ideology' of democracy and progress which is the psychological condition and psychological basis of international solidarity and peace."

### **FROM UTOPIA TO THE CULTURE OF PEACE**

The British scientist Julian Huxley, who in 1946 became UNESCO's first Director-General, was asked to draft a document on the new organization, to which he gave the title *UNESCO, its purpose and its philosophy*. The goal that Huxley set for UNESCO was not only that of preserving the peace, which is obviously the ultimate aim of the whole United Nations system, but of contributing thereby to the fulfilment of humanity, of those unique beings who have still to explore and exploit all their possibilities but who are

hindered in so doing by the obstacles they have themselves raised, in the form of beliefs, ideologies, cultures and so forth, which Huxley regarded as the root cause of the divergences between them, of conflicts and of wars.

Arguing from the viewpoint of an agnostic biologist, Huxley was convinced that it was not by integrating all cultures and all beliefs, with their differences and contradictions, that UNESCO could help to usher in peace as humanity's natural state, since it would be lacking that which he considered essential, a coherent overall philosophy in conformity with its ideal. No philosophical; religious, social, political or economic system in the world could of itself satisfy the ultimate purposes of the new organization. The dream of this scientist, whose view of humanity was both optimistic and utopian, was to lay the foundations of an organization that would "help the peoples of the world to mutual understanding and to a realisation of the common humanity and common tasks which they share, as opposed to the nationalisms which too often tend to isolate and separate them."

But Huxley's ideas were rejected. Most of the delegates to the London conference wanted UNESCO to preserve the diversity of identities and cultures. As the French jurist René Cassin, the guiding spirit behind UNESCO's Constitution, was to say, summing up the founders' viewpoint, the new organization should not "affirm any uniform philosophy, which would strike a blow at the diversity of thinking, not only of nations but even of individuals".

#### **NO SCIENCE WITHOUT CONSCIENCE**

What sets UNESCO apart within the United Nations system is not only its intellectual nature but above all its moral basis. For the founding fathers in London, it was above all an ethical organization operating in a technical field: the conscience of the world, as Jaime Torres Bodet liked to call it. Its main task along the hard road to peace is to contribute to the qualitative improvement of humanity through education, science and culture, to put the relations between individuals and peoples on a moral footing, and to help to establish greater justice, fraternity, understanding and solidarity among them.

Paulo de Berrêdo Carneiro, another eminent figure in UNESCO's history, insisted that "We cannot regulate the human forces conducive to peace save by establishing above purely political authority a spiritual force common to all peoples".

#### **NO PEACE WITHOUT DEVELOPMENT**

UNESCO's founders specified in its Constitution the paths it should follow in order to reach out towards the peoples, not over the heads of the states but through those in government. These paths are followed by educators, scientists, writers and artists, working under the aegis of UNESCO National Commissions and their committees, within non-governmental organizations, among the general population, young and old, within UNESCO Clubs and Associated Schools, in short, in the whole of civil society and among its elites - a vast field of operations in which to sow the fragile seed of peace in the minds of men.

But culture alone is not enough, for the hungry have no ears to hear, and nothing is more terrible than culture when it makes educated people aware of their unjust situation as those whom fate has forgotten. The founding fathers knew and said these things. Torres Bodet ended his remarks with the following words: "The world is waiting for something more than the delimitation of frontiers and zones of influence, something more, in short, than an interim system of security. It is looking for the establishment of a new kind of relationship between nations and between men. Hence the urgency of assigning a common denominator to its

development. And that common denominator to its development. And that common denominator can be supplied only by the moral solidarity of mankind acting through knowledge and on the basis of education.

### BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR



#### CHIKH BÉKRI

Of Algerian origin, Professor of French at the Lycée in Algiers, Principal of the Lycée in Constantine, and Deputy Director of Education. In 1962, appointed Secretary General of the Ministry of Education in the first Algerian Government after independence, and Senior Lecturer at the University of Algiers. Appointed to UNESCO in 1961 as Deputy Director of the Division of Educational Planning; subsequently Chief of the Section for Operational Projects in teacher education at the secondary level.

1968-1970 Headed numerous missions for the World Bank Co-operative Programme.

1970 First Director of the Regional Office for Education in the Arab States in Beirut.

1975 Deputy Assistant Director-General for Operational Projects (Education Sector).

1976-1986 Director of the Executive Office of the Director-General, Assistant Director-General for the Directorate.

1986-1987 Director a.i. of the International Bureau of Education.

Author of 'L'UNESCO, une entreprise erronée?' (Editions Publisud, Paris, 1991).