

(1995) A speech at the occasion of conveying a UNESCO prize for peace education

A plea for scientific humanism

Address

delivered by Professor Ladislav Kováč, President of the International Jury

Mr. Director-General,
Distinguished Permanent Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

During one hour of our ceremony, 114 people on the Earth will perish by violent death. This number can be deduced by averaging data on human killing in the last few years. Every minute, while we will be sitting in the comfortable chairs of the UNESCO headquarters, two human beings are going to be murdered at other places of the world. In local war conflicts. The expectations of those who founded the U. N. system 50 years ago have not been met: the wars have not been eradicated.

Have these expectations been unrealistic? Apparently so. The theories on which these expectations were based have been falsified. We need new theories. Not only organisational changes and reduction of bureaucracy, but a substantial revision of the theoretical foundation may be a task of the current reform of the U. N. system.

Luckily for the arising U. N. organisation for education and culture in 1945, a leading personality in conceiving its conception was Julian Huxley, a prominent British biologist. It was mainly his merit that in the proposed body emphasis was placed on science and science has been included into its name: the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). In his pamphlet "UNESCO: its Purpose and its Philosophy" Huxley formulated and substantiated his main idea: the activities of the organisation must be based on scientific humanism. Granting the uniqueness of man, this humanism considers man as a product of biological evolution. The evolution has determined human nature, imposed restrictions on development, demarcated potentials for good and evil. Huxley's conception was met with opposition and later, in the turbulent decades of the Cold War, virtually abandoned.

I want to use this occasion to plead for the reintroduction of the idea of evolutionary humanism as the basis of the activities of UNESCO. Progress of biology in the last 50 years has strengthened Huxley's views. For hundred thousands of years natural selection was shaping man to make him a group animal fitted adequately to the environment of his natural habitat, the savannah, as the hunter and gatherer. Survival of the individual depended on the ability to coexist peacefully with members of his/her own group and to maintain antagonistic relations toward members of other groups. In the last ten thousand years, cultural evolution has been pushing man with steadily increasing speed into unnatural environments for which he lacks adequate biological matching. The discrepancy between the biological limitations of man and exigencies of cultures generates intergroup tensions, which, in our days, have assumed global dimensions.

The Constitution of UNESCO states in its preamble that "wars begin in the minds of men". Does this statement hold in our days? It does - as long as we do not conceive of mind as something abstract, immaterial, separated from the human body, from senses, from emotions. Wars begin not in the reason but in the heart of men and, as Blaise Pascal wisely put it, "the heart has its reasons of which the reason knows nothing". No appeal to reason can overcome the biological basis of our behaviour. We have to understand our nature, and

emotions as its essential constituent, in order to act in harmony with it and not vainly attempt to "master" it by our reason.

Evolutionary humanism recognises the value of cultural polymorphism. Science, however, is not a culture among other, equivalent cultures. Science is the single product of cultural evolution endowed with intercultural, supracultural status: it is a process of continuous reduction of ignorance, growth of objective knowledge. For evolutionary humanism, the heliocentric theory of Copernicus is not equivalent to the geocentric theory of Ptolemy. Accordingly, it can neither be indifferent to discrediting science nor tolerant to fanaticism. Unbelievable as it is, the same story recurs after 400 years: refuting the contemporary knowledge on the nature of life, on evolution, on human embryology, combating family planning and contraception is the same arrogant ignorance as had been the refutation of Copernicus and persecution of Galileo. Except that the consequences of this ignorance are now much more serious and their gravity increases by every second.

With perspicacity Huxley, as perhaps the first among humanists of his period, became aware of the problem of uncontrolled population growth. He declared that UNESCO should have a policy of providing "birth control facilities". Unfortunately, such a policy has not been implemented. It is appalling that during the short time that elapsed since I started my address, ten human beings have been killed. It is equally appalling, but much more threatening that, during this time, the number of the Earth population has increased by some hundreds – in every single second three babies were born. During these few minutes the sources of the Earth free energy have diminished. The number of new physicians and teachers has increased much less than the number of the new-borns.

Samuel P. Huntington has justly expressed conviction that the world politics will soon be dominated by clashes of cultures. It should be made clear that the stupendous biological driving force of these conflicts, under the guise of fanatic ideologies, will be the pressure of overpopulated, poor, starving countries on the rich countries. Unmanageable migrations, escape from overcrowded regions, mass envy and demands of redistribution of wealth will be the main cause of future conflicts.

A complete prevention of these conflicts is out of our reach. Let us act to minimise them. Let us not behave as a person who, at night, was searching an object under a street lamp, even though he had lost it somewhere else, arguing that, if he searched it in the dark, he would not see anything. Population explosion may still be bridled, even if in the last moment, if science and education do take it as the utmost priority. They are areas, however, in which our knowledge has virtually not advanced since antiquity: in political sciences, law, axiology, ethics. With only tiny islands of scanty knowledge the immense ocean of superstitions and illusions in human and social sciences represents an imminent danger. These sciences should quickly absorb the knowledge accumulated by biology. The programme of the expansion of social sciences, adopted by UNESCO, is a hope, especially if directed toward development of biosocial disciplines.

I would like to express my belief that the present laureate of the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education, The Peace Project of Stadtschlaining/Austria consisting of the Austrian Study Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution and The European University Centre for Peace Education, will orient part of its activity along these lines. On behalf of the Jury I congratulate to the representatives of the two institutions.