

# Dialogue and Heritage in the Cultural Strategy of UNESCO

## *A Brief Overview*

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## Abstract

UNESCO is a scientific, educational, and cultural branch – or specialized agency, to speak in technical terms – of the United Nations organization, which has for the latest seventy years been instrumental in setting standards, promoting scientific research and societal discussions, and supporting innovations, both nationally and internationally. Intercultural dialogue has invariably served as a focal point of its manifold activities. Tracing back some of the basic issues in the elaboration of intercultural dialogue as well as the most actual trends in its development forms the main objective of the present paper. This account comes from years of experience as head of one of the well-known and respected UNESCO research and educational chairs: Comparative Studies of Spiritual Traditions, their Specific Cultures and Interreligious Dialogue.<sup>1</sup>

## Keywords

UNESCO – intercultural dialogue – cultural heritage

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- 1 See our flagship publication, “World Religions in the Context of the Contemporary Culture: New Perspectives of Dialogue and Mutual Understanding. Christianity and Islam in the Context of Contemporary Culture: New Prospects of Dialogue and Mutual Understanding in the Russian Federation and Eastern Europe, in Central Asia and the Caucasus,” (English and Russian) eds. D. Spivak and S. Shankman (St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg Branch of Russian Institute for Cultural Research / Russian Baltic Information Center “Blitz”, 2011). [http://www.spbric.org/index.php?action=pub\\_UNESCO\\_mir\\_reg](http://www.spbric.org/index.php?action=pub_UNESCO_mir_reg).

The importance of intercultural contact and cooperation was emphasized in the preamble to the initial Constitution of UNESCO (1945), postulating 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.

This statement was subsequently elaborated in a series of conventions as well as in a number of programs, plans, road maps, and other standard-setting and awareness-raising texts in the course of the manifold activities of UNESCO. By the end of the millennium the notion of “dialogue” had become central to the organization. Of course, the purport of this basic notion has been since constantly shifting within the organization, reflecting thus the vitality of internal expert discussions as much as the mutating nature of philosophical and societal thought. Starting from ideas of “tolerance” and “unity-in-diversity,” UNESCO gradually shifted in the early 2000s to ideas of “dialogue among civilizations,” “intercultural and interreligious dialogue” and, more recently, “rapprochement of cultures.”

The objectives and inner logic behind the aforementioned sequence of paradigmatic shifts would deserve to be fully reflected upon as part of a specific domain of inquiry within the “history of ideas.” Suffice it to say here that the latest move, namely from the “intercultural and interreligious dialogue” to the “rapprochement of cultures,” implies shifting the focus from “celebrating diversities” to cooperating “over the borders.” As stated in the Action Plan of the International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures, adopted by UNESCO for the time period spanning 2013 to 2022 and identified as Priority Area II,

Rather than emphasizing the differences in culture, heritage, religion or belief among groups, focusing on common elements leads to understanding that there are also similarities worth celebrating ... Therefore, it is important to provide opportunities for citizens to not only learn about the values, attitudes, behaviors of those living in specific other cultures, but also to support conversations relating to values, attitudes, and behaviors shared across groups as a way of fostering social cohesion.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Action Plan 2013-2022,” International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures” (Paris: UNESCO, 2013).

This change of focus obviously stemmed from the inner development of the cultural strategy of UNESCO. As early as 2005, we find a structurally comparable definition in the main text of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions:

‘Interculturality’ refers to the existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, the change of focus should be regarded within the framework of the general shift from the multicultural to the intercultural paradigm, which is central to present-day cultural studies. A recent publication supported and endorsed by UNESCO confirms the point:

... at the core of the IPP [Intercultural Policy Paradigm] lies one basic idea: that the interaction among people from different diversity groups matters, and that this has been overlooked by the MPP [Multicultural Policy Paradigm], which has mainly concentrated on securing the cultural practices of diverse groups in terms of rights and equal opportunities. Currently, the strategy based on the promotion of interaction, community-building and prejudice reduction is one of the approaches most widely recognized by international institutions, especially European ones.<sup>4</sup>

Dialogue belongs to the very core of the mission of UNESCO. To cite an explicit formulation from the main text of the Medium-Term Strategy of the organization from 2014 to 2021,

UNESCO’s mission statement shall be: As a specialized agency of the United Nations, UNESCO – pursuant to its Constitution – contributes to the *building of peace, the eradication of poverty, and sustainable development* [italics added] and intercultural dialogue through education, the sciences, culture, communication and information.<sup>5</sup>

3 “2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions” (4:8). [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=31038&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=31038&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html).

4 Ricard Zapata-Barrero, “The intercultural turn in Europe: process of policy paradigm change and formation,” in *Interculturalism at the Crossroads. Comparative Perspectives on Concepts, Policies and Practices*, ed. F. Mansouri (UNESCO Publishing, 2017), 181.

5 37 C/4 2014-2021 Medium-term Strategy (Paris: UNESCO, 2014), 14.

Still, the lists of focal issues set by UNESCO, do not mention “dialogue”, whether among so-called “global priorities” (development of African nations, gender equality), “overarching objectives” (culture of peace, equitable and sustainable development), or “thematic issues” (HIV/AIDS, rethinking the development agenda). This apparent contradiction stems from the obvious fact that UNESCO tends to regard intercultural dialogue as instrumental – that is, dialogue is of vital importance not *per se*, but as a valuable tool for resolving essential tasks such as the building of peace and the eradication of poverty, and for ensuring sustainable development as mentioned above.

Imposing a culture of peace and non-violence is an overarching objective that also recurs in UN documents, and the following shows how the function of dialogue is conceived:

Given its mandate and its experience, UNESCO has been designated by the United Nations General Assembly as lead agency for the implementation of all resolutions related to the ‘culture of peace’, defined as consisting ‘of values, attitudes and behaviours that reflect and inspire social interaction and sharing based on the principles of freedom, justice and democracy, all human rights, tolerance and solidarity, that reject violence and endeavour to prevent conflicts by tackling their root causes *to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation* [italics added] and that guarantee the full exercise of all rights and the means to participate fully in the development process of their society’.<sup>6</sup>

As for promoting sustainable development, the main relevant document issued by the UN in 2015 under the title “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, does not contain any clarification of the notion of “sustainable development.” Rather, the document simply lists seventeen “sustainable development goals”<sup>7</sup> and does not make any explicit mention of the importance of dialogue. However, Goal 16, i.e., “promote *peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development* [italics added], provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels” does make implicit the assumption that “peaceful and inclusive societies” are normally based on the principle of dialogue.

6 “UNESCO’s Program of Action. Culture of Peace and Non-Violence. A Vision in Action” (Paris: UNESCO, 2013), 6.

7 For details, see Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015, 70/1, “Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (New York: UN Organization, 2015), 14.

Other texts that are pivotal in reflecting the cultural strategy of UNESCO in general also refer to dialogue, but only implicitly. The Action Plan for the UNESCO International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures (2013-2022) presents sustainable development and rapprochement of cultures as two isomorphic goals albeit different:

As poverty and environmental degradations are recognized causes of conflict and obstacles to reconciliation among and within nations, *the rapprochement of cultures builds on the same requirements as sustainable development* [italics added], notably with respect to the oft-neglected ethical, social and cultural dimensions of the latter.<sup>8</sup>

If our interpretation is correct, then dialogue could be regarded as playing the same fundamental structural role in both sustainable development and the cultural strategy of UNESCO.

The same applies to “observing human rights.” As is known, commitment to the implementation of “universal, indivisible and interdependent” human rights lies at the very core of the mission of UNESCO, which has invariably based its activities on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). In line with Article 27 of the Declaration, human rights may be viewed more specifically in terms of cultural rights. This dimension is elaborated in more detail in Article 5 of UNESCO’s Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001):

All persons have therefore the right to express themselves and to create and disseminate their work in the language of their choice, and particularly in their mother tongue; all persons are entitled to quality education and training that fully respect their cultural identity; and all persons have the right to participate in the cultural life of their choice and conduct their own cultural practices, subject to respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.<sup>9</sup>

This statement would make sense and be relevant had UNESCO’s mission indeed concentrated on observation of cultural, scientific, and educational rights – or, to be more precise, on observation of educational, scientific, and

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8 “Priority Area of Action IV,” see “Action Plan 2013-2022,” International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures (Paris: UNESCO, 2013), 14.

9 Article 5 of UNESCO’s Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001). For the full text of the Declaration, see [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=13179&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13179&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html).

cultural aspects of human rights – leaving the vaster domain of human rights per se to the UN organization as a whole. However, such is not the case as evidenced in various UNESCO documents. One telling example is the “Joint Message on the Occasion of World Teachers’ Day 2017: Teaching in Freedom, Empowering Teacher,” issued on 5th October 2017 by UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova together with leaders from other humanitarian organizations. Rights are only mentioned once in relation to the “rights and responsibilities of teachers and educators,” that is, the aspect of educational rights pertaining to the teaching side of the educational process.<sup>10</sup> The organization has clearly chosen to press on the notion of human rights in its all-encompassing dimension instead of more specifically within the fields of UNESCO. At the same time, this strategy is totally understandable and justified in the present-day context of a world whereby the most essential human rights are systematically violated.

The principles laid at the core of the Declarations the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity did not contradict each other. There is nonetheless a latent point of tension, for the 1948 Declaration has gradually come to be regarded as a manifesto of universalism while the 2001 Declaration as advocating pluralism. This tension has not been perceived as inexorable and unworkable, as evidenced by a 2015 UNESCO Expert Meeting report on the issue that took place within the framework of the International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures:

Cultural diversity and universal values are often posited at opposing poles of law and practice. The Decade responds to the pressing need to identify and demonstrate new articulations between cultural diversity and universal values. *The rapprochement of cultures can be a means of reducing tensions between universalism*, asserted by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) *and pluralism* [italics added] qualified by the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) ...<sup>11</sup>

As already suggested, rapprochement of cultures tends to depend significantly upon intercultural dialogue being restructured and reoriented. In point of fact, conceptions at the intersection of human rights and intercultural dialogue seem to currently gain new momentum in both theoretical and practical terms.

10 For the full official text of the “Joint Message on the Occasion of World Teachers’ Day 2017”, see <http://unesdoc.UNESCO.org/images/0025/002592/259268e.pdf>.

11 Expert Meeting 2015, International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures, 9.

Responsible intercultural dialogue should be *dynamic*. In introducing this attribute, UNESCO dwells not so much on the obvious fact that dialogue is by its essence conducted in time, but rather on the assumption that persons or social groups taking part in a dialogue are willing and able to shift their viewpoints and attitudes in its course. As dialogue is primarily conducted in the framework of diverse cultural identities, and often about their definite aspects, this necessarily means that identities may be in fact qualitatively altered in the course of a dialogue. To cite once again from the Action Plan for International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures,

The Decade shall be a chance to illustrate that diversity is above all a dynamic process which offers new opportunities for all to increase knowledge, competences and skills thanks to the creative potential of people to constantly reshape standards of well-being and ways of living together.<sup>12</sup>

This means that, for its part, the nature of dialogue within the framework of the cultural strategy of UNESCO is to be regarded *not only as communicative but also* cognitive. Participants of a true intercultural dialogue do not only exchange messages; they open new cognitive avenues in relation to themselves – and often to the society and the world. In elaborating this facet of dialogue, UNESCO experts endorse some of the influential thought orientations elaborated in the past century, from Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophy of Dialogue to Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of the Other, both of whom were ardent and highly creative readers of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's polyphonic novels.

UNESCO seems to regard creative inclusion into dialogue as a unique means of humanization in present-day world. If globalization initially used to be seen overall as a major threat to culture, viz., primarily as a source of standardization akin to mass culture, it is nowadays – at least in part – regarded as promoting or creating “conditions for renewed dialogue among cultures and civilizations.”<sup>13</sup> Such assumptions refer implicitly to specific multicultural communities that have emerged from globalization, and where constructive dialogue together with “new modalities of communication” have been elaborated *ad hoc*.

Another focal point of the cultural strategy of UNESCO is about “protecting, promoting, and transmitting heritage.” This constitutes Strategic Objective 7 of

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., IV.2.13.

<sup>13</sup> See Preamble to the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. For full text, see [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=13179&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13179&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html).

the Medium-Term Strategy of UNESCO for 2014-2021.<sup>14</sup> The first paragraph of the Objective contains the following definition:

Heritage, understood in its entirety – *natural and cultural, tangible and intangible* [italics added] – constitutes assets inherited from the past that we wish to transmit to future generations because of their social value and the way in which they embody *identity* and belonging.<sup>15</sup>

The added Italics relating to the “*natural and cultural, tangible and intangible*” heritage as well as to the issue of *identity* deserve a comment, albeit brief. The former points to a series of standard-setting devices such as, in particular, conventions elaborated and, at least partly, implemented by UNESCO – such as “Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage” (1972); “Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage” (2001); and “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage” (2003).<sup>16</sup> In this way, the structure of the field of heritage could be approximately outlined and its continuity acknowledged within the framework of UNESCO.

As for “*identity*” it forms “the human dimension of heritage.” Serving as a springboard for other conceptions and standing high on the UNESCO agenda, the very notion of identity is like a bridge that links ideas and values originally perceived to be independent. In this respect, dialogue is here of the essence. If the text of the Medium-Term Strategy considers dialogue as a separate mode of research, politics and societal activism, it represents technically speaking the core of Strategic Objective 6 where dialogue is clearly defined as “supporting inclusive social development, fostering intercultural dialogue for the rapprochement of cultures and promoting ethical principles.”<sup>17</sup>

UNESCO acknowledges that to conceive heritage and dialogue as different Strategic Objectives stems from the very practical fact that these two objectives are worked on by different teams that think differently. Everyday life, however, calls for the urgent need to conceive both Strategic Objectives as one

14 “Medium-Term Strategy,” International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures, 37C/4, 24.

15 Ibid., 7:66.

16 For the full texts of UNESCO declarations and conventions, visit the official portal of the organization, respectively, [http://portal.UNESCO.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=12027&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=-471.html](http://portal.UNESCO.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=12027&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=-471.html). [http://portal.UNESCO.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=12025&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=-471.html](http://portal.UNESCO.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=12025&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=-471.html).

17 For the full text, see <http://unesdoc.UNESCO.org/images/0022/002278/227860e.pdf>.



single entity. Dialogue can be used to justify or simply enable the protection of cultural heritage, or, from a different perspective, we can preserve the heritage in order to give momentum to intercultural dialogue at a particular moment in time. In such cases cultural identity serves indeed as an intermediate construct across borders and temporalities.

Let us briefly consider a typical conflict situation. Objects of cultural heritage may be endangered – especially those that do not belong exclusively to either side of the conflict. These are objects of “shared or cross-border” descent, to speak in more technical terms. The one-sided identity belligerents have to accept and handle multi-faceted cultural identity situations by adopting shared attitudes and viewpoints. To this end, corresponding modalities of intercultural dialogue must be implemented, and genuine understanding of situations where multiple identities are involved must be developed. This is what gives impetus to the protection of the objects of heritage at stake.

In this sense, matters of heritage are linked, at least temporarily and in operational terms, to that of dialogue. With this in mind, we can better appreciate the purport of the following statement from the Medium-Term Strategy of UNESCO that concluded the section on heritage:

In advancing dialogue, ‘learning to live together’ and inclusiveness, UNESCO *will promote the role of shared or cross-border cultural heritage and initiatives* [added italics] to build bridges among nations and communities.<sup>18</sup>

Two types of projects have proved to be most effective in promoting “shared or cross-border heritage” and “building bridges among nations and communities,” namely elaborating and promoting regional histories and historical “routes of dialogue.” In the former, projects focus on tracing back shared viewpoints and attitudes of large clusters of nations, such as, typically, Central Asia or the Caribbean.<sup>19</sup> In the latter, historical routes of migrations or travels serve as focal points for discussion and action, e.g., “The Slave Route” or “Integral Study of the Silk Roads, Roads of Dialogue,” both being endorsed and supported by UNESCO.<sup>20</sup>

18 “Medium-Term Strategy,” International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures, 7:72.

19 For more information, see the following internet site specifically created and developed within the UNESCO framework: <http://www.UNESCO.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/general-and-regional-histories/>.

20 For more information, see the following official internet site: <http://www.UNESCO.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/slave-route>. Also see the following online platform: <http://en.UNESCO.org/silkroad/UNESCO-silk-road-online-platform>).

To retrieve and understand basic ways in which heritage narratives used to be generated, transmitted and implemented, means that we have to turn to *history and memory*. This comes as no surprise given the rapid pace of development of contemporary memory studies – or, to reiterate Pierre Nora’s felicitous expression, the “age of commemoration.”<sup>21</sup> Memory, whether personal or collective, tends to be generated from lower societal strata and to remain informal and oral, or, at least, not strictly codified.

History, especially national histories, tends to come from the upper strata of society and is then transmitted to the lower strata in a variety of ways (school, museums, mass-media, commemorative rituals, and so on). This is when history is written (and/or digitalized), ordered, and structured. A constructive dialogue between history and memory becomes all the more timely, with the aim of promoting processes of reconciliation that are vital for ensuring social coherence in general. The following recent UNESCO formulation on the topic will, no doubt, prove to be seminal:

Dialogue between history and memory can be a way to move towards a more holistic and pluralistic vision of the tragedies of history, their consequences and how to transcend them.<sup>22</sup>

To sum up, the spheres of dialogue and heritage form indispensable parts of the cultural strategy of UNESCO. The two spheres often share common issues, notions and narrative practices. They are currently undergoing a process of reform and are being developed in a most active way in both theoretical and practical terms with expected substantial implications beyond the scope of UNESCO.

### Biography

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21 See Pierre Nora, “*L’ère de la commémoration*,” [The age of commemoration] in *Les Lieux de mémoire*, ed. P. Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-92), vol. 3, 977-1012.

22 See Expert Meeting 2015, International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures, 19.

Committee of UNESCO chairs of the Russian Federation. Dimitri Spivak researches in cultural policies (esp. intercultural and interfaith dialogue) and consciousness studies. He has authored and edited numerous books, including *Metaphysics of St.Petersburg* (3 vols., 2003-2005), *Christianity and Islam in the Context of Contemporary Culture* (2009), *World Religions in the Context of the Contemporary Culture* (2011), and *Russia and Poland: Memory of Empires / Empires of Memory* (2013).