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A Symposium on New Humanism at UNESCO
A Philosophical Reflection

by
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The more I reflect on the meetings in Paris in January 2012, the less I understand. I seem to have played a role in political theater. When I was just about doubting if my presence made any sense, I found out that originally the Russians had wanted to have representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church as part of their delegation to UNESCO to discuss New Humanism.

It all began when director-general of the UNESCO since 2009, Irina Bokova, came up with the idea of New Humanism:

The greatest challenge is to lead the world into a new era of peace and humanism, to create more inclusive, just, and equitable societies through sustainable economic and social development, based on science, innovation and new technologies that will serve mankind and will preserve the environment.^[1]

In the publication of UNESCO, Humanism, a new idea,^[2] this idea of New Humanism was somewhat elaborated upon. The Russian Center for Science and Culture in Paris took up the challenge and organized an international seminar on this topic. Valerii Kuvakin, professor of (Russian) philosophy at Moscow State University, and president of the Russian Humanist Society, was invited to take part, and to invite other humanists. Kuvakin has a wide network in international humanism, and he invited from the USA the eminence grise of secular humanism, Paul Kurtz, with two associates, Toni Van Pelt, a specialist in humanist feminism, and Norm Allen, specialist in applied humanism in the non-western world. Kuvakin also invited the president of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, Sonja Eggericks, and myself. Last Summer I taught at the Russian Humanist Summer School, organized by Kuvakin.

It turned out that language was a major barrier for meaningful communication: the symposium was in either French or Russian, and the talks were translated from French to Russian, or the other way. However, not all participants spoke Russian or French, including me. I can only understand some French. The second day, when we met at the UNESCO, the language problem again popped up. UNESCO is a bilingual institute with as working languages French and English. When vice director-general of UNESCO, Hans d'Orville asked whether he should talk in English or in French, there was some consternation. The Russians wanted French (they brought with them a French-Russian interpreter). Toni Van Pelt insisted on English, because referring to the symposium the day before, she couldn't understand French. A not very meaningful compromise was found. The remarks in English were not translated, so only those who could understand English could understand.

At the Russian Institute for Science and Culture

About 50 people gathered in the upscale Russian Center for Science and Culture. Unfortunately, Irina Bokova could not come; vice-president of UNESCO, Hans d'Orville read out her talk, in which she stressed the importance of equal rights for women and girls.

After the reading of the talk by Irina Bokova, there were statements about what New Humanism could mean, including by UNESCO ambassadors of Spain and Sri Lanka. The ambassador of Sri Lanka spoke about the multitude of global crises of today, including a crisis in philosophy. But, what crisis in philosophy? He was not specific about what he meant with it. Although there is much in contemporary philosophy, which seems either irrelevant or nonsensical to me (like Russian philosophers looking backwards, and much of the French continental tradition), there are many enlightened ideas in contemporary philosophy.

After the break more talks by Russians and the international guests, but by then most UNESCO people had left. Some of the Russians stressed the importance of humanism in Russian intellectual history, mentioning names of some 19th century novelists. One of the Russian speakers argued that humanism and communism are the same. These remarks show that there is a serious need to elaborate what is meant by humanism and 'new humanism'.

Paul Kurtz gave an enthusiastic and inspirational speech pleading for a planetary humanism and global common values. Kurtz insisted that everybody stood up, to stretch his or her limbs. That was needed indeed, after hours of passive listening. In 2010 Kurtz issued the Neo Humanist Statement of Secular Principles and Values, which could be the New Humanism UNESCO is searching for:

Increasingly, many other issues are of concern to the planetary community and may require cooperative action, such as the preservation of unique species and ecosystems, prevention of excessive fishing on the high seas, management of economic recessions, development of new technologies with their promise for humankind, amelioration of poverty and hunger, reduction of great disparities in wealth, seizing the opportunities to reduce illiteracy, addressing the need for capital investments or technical assistance in rural areas and depressed urban centers, and providing for public sanitation systems and fresh water. Of special concern is the need to liberate women from ancient repressive social systems and attitudes and to emancipate minorities, such as the untouchables in India, who suffer from religious prejudice and caste systems. Similarly, gays and other sexual minorities need to be liberated wherever they suffer harsh punishment because of their sexual orientations. The list of indignities is long indeed and a constant campaign for education and improvement is essential.

Kurtz emphasized that ethics should be independent from religion. Ethics should be 'rational considerations, tested on their consequences.' Kurtz argued that we should prioritize our global environmental problems, which is 'the greatest crisis that humankind faces.' We need a new ethic, which makes it clear that 'we have no rights to drain resources from future generations.'

In her speech Sonja Eggerikx emphasized that democracy is a prerequisite for a humanistic society, and that the IHEU stands for secularism, laicism, human rights, and rationalism. She put emphasis on the need for equal rights of women and gays.

A long parade of elderly men in dark suits gave talks. There was, however, a small minority of women presenting talks. The high-heeled staff members were all beautiful young ladies. It seemed the audience consisted only of speakers, plus interpreters, plus (high heeled) personnel of the Russian Institute. All the speakers got seven minutes, but the chairman was not very strict about that. Generally, the Russian way of giving a talk is not very inspiring. Another problem for the Russians is that they have taken up to promote the New Humanism, but in their own country there are serious problems with many humanist ideals, such as democracy and human rights. To be more precise and give some examples: homosexuality is a taboo, the freedom of expression is limited when it comes down to criticizing the government, especially Putin, and the rising political and social importance of the Russian orthodox church and the decline of moral and political secularism. So, frankly, I do not think Russians in general are the best guides towards a New Humanism. Of course there are Russian humanists, like Valerii Kuvakin from the Russian Humanist Society, but humanists form a tiny minority in Russia, unfortunately.

I adapted my talk whilst listening to the other talks. I inserted an extra point and shorted my main point on eco-humanism. So, I started out explaining the need for a common language (a lingua franca) in order to be able to communicate with each other. And the best, non-political candidate for that would be Esperanto. If everybody just learned one other language, we could all use this language as a common language. The benefit of Esperanto is that it is politically neutral and since there are no native speakers, no one is privileged. Since there was no English translator available, I wonder how many understood my point. My second and main point, was making New Humanism more concrete with the use of extended no harm principle of John Stuart Mill, that everything is allowed as long as no others are harmed in the process. Then I continued that these others should include all those who are able to suffer, and thus that this includes non-human animals and future generations as well.

Finally, the whole audience had given their speeches and we were treated to dinner and drinks. The dinner included many dead animals, but also fresh fruit, so that I ended up as a fruitarian. I was not the only person who dashed for a drink, which included vodka, cognac, and wine. I drank all three. In the mix and mingle with the Russians, I appeared to be the odd one out. It might have been my speech, or the lack of a common language.

At UNESCO

The stated aim of UNESCO is: 'To contribute to the building of peace, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue through education, the sciences, culture, communication and information.' A problem for UNESCO is that it is an international organization, which not only consists of secular liberal democracies, but also outright criminal states. UNESCO looks for a moral Esperanto, values to which all, or most, people can subscribe. But the problem with that is, that it hollows out the content. Of course the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the most important moral yardstick for the UN and the UNESCO. The Millennium Goals are more clear goals to implement some of the basic human rights. The UDHR is

essentially humanist. It places individual freedom and protection and welfare of the individual central, not collectives such as religious or ethnic groups.

Humanism is cosmopolitan, or planetary, as Paul Kurtz calls it, and that means we should not look too narrowly to Russian humanism (whatever that is), but to look at the best humanism has to offer, like Bertrand Russell, A.C. Grayling, Peter Singer, Martha Nussbaum, Paul Kurtz, Richard Dawkins and many others. In order to find a practical, workable form of humanism, the UNESCO New Humanism, one does not need to look too far back, just lean on the works of the best of the humanist philosophers. Of course, one can look for humanistic elements around the world and cherry-pick what is good. This is exactly what has been done by the historian of ideas, Bill Cooke, in his book *A Wealth of Insights, Humanist Thought since the Enlightenment*. Within the UN framework, it seems to me, there is enough to find inspiration and guidance: 1) the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 2) the Millennium Development Goals, and 3) the Earth Charter. The Earth Charter especially is important, because it acknowledges the human dependence on ecosystems, and our duties to future generations. The Earth Charter is less anthropocentric (but biocentric) than other UN statements, and mainstream (new) humanism.

Another problem UNESCO struggles with is cultural diversity. Bokova pleads for cultural diversity:

Respect for cultural diversity is a core element of 21st century humanism. It is a vital constituent during these times of globalization. No single culture has a universal monopoly. Each and every one can contribute to the consolidation of our shared values.^[3]

The problem is that emphasis on the worth of cultural diversity can cover up cultural practices that collide with human rights. For example the Indian caste system is deeply engrained in Hinduism and pervades much of Indian culture. But the role of UNESCO is striving towards the goal of equality and equal rights should strive to get rid of the caste system. I list some of cultural diversity that the world would be better off without, because it involves victims: female and male (non-medical) circumcision, religion in schools, ritual slaughter, non acceptance of homosexuality, non acceptance of gender equality, sharia laws, including punishment for apostasy, Chinese medicine, (African) witchcraft, and, importantly heteronomous ethics.^[4] Therefore, I don't think it is a good idea to pay too much attention to cultural diversity. Human rights leave room for much individual and cultural diversity, within the framework of human rights.

Hans d'Orville, vice director-general of UNESCO, remarked that according to UNESCO religion is part of culture and thus religion is not addressed as religion. He also said that there is critique on the New Humanism that it is too western and that there is a need to look for non-western input. This seems a pragmatic way to circumvent questions about truth claims. However, the UNESCO is an organization devoted to science and education: how can you then not address the question of whether or not religious truth claims are true? This is the big problem with international cooperation: when looking for the lowest common denominator, you end up with nice words, without much/any practical application.

At the UNESCO meeting Toni Van Pelt commented that non-violence should be applied to all humans, including women (e.g. domestic violence). In her prepared talk *The Intersection of Humanism and Feminism*, she states that:

Feminism is women's quest for equal rights and is philosophically linked with modern humanism. Feminism aims to establish, define, and defend equal political, economic, and social rights for women around the world. In addition, feminism seeks to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment. This includes a serious and ongoing examination of the sameness of women and men; of our shared humanity. A feminist as well as a humanist is a woman or man whose beliefs and behavior are based on the definition of equality of all.

Men's liberation from macho, paternalistic culture is a necessary element of a feminist and humanist society. Recognition that men are also harmed (even as they are privileged) by sexism and gender roles can move humanity and civilization forward in the new century. This realization that sexism privileges and harms men is a fact that all humans worldwide must be educated on and finally and fully reject for the good of society around the globe.

Norm Allen, who works in many parts of the non-western world, brought to the fore that 'consensus on many concrete issue is not that difficult, and that it comes about naturally to people from around the world'. He spoke about humanism in action.

I commented on the topic of nonviolence and made three remarks: 1) is it concrete enough? (does it include e.g. condemnation of child mutilation, like circumcision, 2) does it also include violence against non-human animals, especially in factory farms, and 3) does it also include violence against future generations in the way that we are living unsustainably? Answers: No, no, no.

After the short meeting with UNESCO staff, there was a dinner in the UNESCO restaurant. It was a preset dead animals lunch. I had to request a vegan lunch. That it was assumed that we would all eat meat and fish, shows two blind spots of (new) humanism. Firstly, that it is humans-only (anthropocentric and speciesistic). Non-human animals are not inside the moral circle. And, secondly, there is no thought about the consequences of our economies and (food) production on future generations. Like much of humanism, the New Humanism is inherently anthropocentric, with a blind eye for future humans and non-human animals.

At Sorbonne University

In the evening there was a meeting of the Russian delegation, of which I found myself to be a member, with professors of the Sorbonne University. I presume that the Russians will write in their report: 'interesting meeting with professors of the Sorbonne'. I don't know why the French professors agreed on it. It was a theatre of the absurd. First, one of the professors gave us a tour around the building, including a nice rooftop view. It turned out to be the best part of the meeting.

Then followed some extremely general talks by the professors about the university and their departments. When it finally came down to humanism, they made a very general remark that ‘humanism is very vague’. None of them was a philosopher or had any involvement with humanism.

Skeptical Reflections

I do not think New Humanism should be the official UNESCO philosophy. When UNESCO strives towards realizing its goals, it should find meaningful networks and relations. The humanist movement is a natural alliance (more so than most religious organizations), because humanism strives for the same goals as UNESCO does. But humanism is more; humanism is a worldview, a life stance and embraces values and virtues. In order to find the largest common denominator - that is a moral and political Esperanto - it is not necessary that everyone (explicitly) embraces (secular) humanism. Bokova seems to take the same line as Julian Huxley, the first director general of UNESCO, in 1946. Huxley argued that the underlying philosophy of UNESCO should be Scientific Humanism, as he writes in his pamphlet UNESCO: Its Purpose and Philosophy. Historian of ideas Bill Cooke comments in his work A Wealth of Insights: ‘Scientific Humanism, especially when graced in capitals, cannot legitimately claim to be the default philosophy. It is true that UNESCO’s aims are essentially humanistic, but there is a big difference between something humanistic and it officially espousing Scientific Humanism.’ (p. 427). The same goes for Bokova’s New Humanism. Of course, I think it is important that humanists and the humanist movement, like the International Humanist and Ethical Union, work closely with the UNESCO, and that religious organizations are held at bay, but UNESCO should not espouse New Humanism, or any other world view, life stance, philosophy or system as its official, default philosophy. But I do hope that humanists can help with practical and theoretical guidance, towards a better world with less suffering and more happiness, including non-human animals and future generations.

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^[1] <http://www.bokova.eu/?cat=12>

^[2] <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002130/213061e.pdf>. The subtitle ‘A New Idea’, is rather strange. Humanism definitely is not a new idea, though the content of humanism can be renewed. Humanism is by nature dynamic and flexible to adapt to new circumstances, but its core – e.g. valuing individual liberty – is not.

^[3] <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002130/213061e.pdf>

^[4] On the topic of the need for and importance of secular ethics Paul Cliteur, The Secular Outlook. In defense of moral and political secularism.