



Speech by Jacques Chirac, President of the French Republic to the 32nd Session of the General Conference of UNESCO

Paris - Tuesday, 14 October 2003

Mr President of the Republic of Peru, my dear friend,
Please let me tell you first that hearing your speech was a great pleasure.
Judging by the applause that followed, you have known how to reach the heart and also, I hope, the mind of those who listened to it.

Mr President of the 32nd General Conference of UNESCO,
Mr Director-General,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In 1945, after one of the worst tragedies in history, when Nazism was finally vanquished, the Allies conceived of a remarkable project: to uphold peace and understanding between nations by sharing and disseminating knowledge and culture. This is the purpose of UNESCO. Of all the universal organisations, UNESCO serves as the crucible for a global moral conscience, the place where nations come to seek assistance and cooperation in overcoming illiteracy and where nations participate on an equal footing in scientific and cultural exchanges.

This great aspiration should bring us all together, as the President of the Republic of Peru just pointed out. That is why France welcomes the return of the United States to UNESCO. It holds out the hope of new advances in education, dialogue between cultures and scientific progress. In these times marked by the persistence of mass destitution, poverty, the threat of fanaticism and terrorism, the reaffirmation of the 1945 pact is encouraging for all those who believe in a more just and peaceful world. In a word, those who believe in a globalization humanized and under control.

I am also delighted to welcome the newest UNESCO member, Timor-Leste. Each culture expresses a different facet of human experience and contributes its own history and special genius. Our differences should not be a handicap or an excuse for confrontation. Instead, they should be a source of inspiration and confidence in humanity's future.

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Today, we expect UNESCO to serve as a point of reference; we expect it to give meaning and a humanistic purpose to the forces at work in globalisation. The unprecedented progress and dissemination of science, technology, knowledge and information have abolished borders, brought people closer together and transformed our lives. The conditions look right for a more unified world. Yet, at the same time, and in reaction to these changes, the world is now faced with communal isolation, exclusion, intolerance and rejection of modernity. There is an urgent need for governments to discuss these changes here at UNESCO in order to control them. Our organisation must be a special forum for universal and individual concerns: the universal concerns of humanity, its fundamental values and its shared aspirations for peace, well-being and knowledge; and the individual concerns of nations and cultures and people,



which are all equal in dignity, as are all humans.

This is the purpose of the International Convention on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which we have just finished drafting. It extends the protection of heritage to cultures where the preferred means of expression are the spoken word, memory and traditional know-how. It pays homage to peoples that have been overlooked too often, peoples who disappear year after year in humanity's general indifference, peoples whose experience is irreplaceable for our future, these indigenous peoples who urgently need protection, respect and restoration of their rights.

Two years ago, in this same spot, I presented France's proposals based on the conviction that the fight against terrorism requires a dialogue between cultures. These proposals echoed our common aspiration that gave rise to the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity adopted on 2 November 2001, along with the governments' commitments, particularly the governments of French-speaking countries.

Now that these principles have been established, we must enshrine them in law by means of a convention. Such a convention will enable peoples and countries concerned about their identity to open up to the world with more confidence.

The convention will be an extension of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and uphold its principles. The new convention will recognise each country's right to adopt or maintain the public policies necessary for the preservation and development of its cultural and linguistic heritage. It will uphold the special status of cultural creations. It will organise the international solidarity necessary to ensure that everyone benefits from this right. It will be the international community's response to attempts to use peoples' identities to isolate them, distortion of popular traditions to oppose peoples and to turn them against each other in order to dominate them.

To those that fear that such a convention would restrict the free circulation of intellectual works, France answers that it will do no such thing. In all of our democratic countries, even those with the most unregulated markets, the constitution and legislation ensure our freedoms, fight against monopolies, protect minorities, stimulate artistic creation and patronage, and promote diversity. This is because freedom flourishes under the rule of law and is stifled by anarchy. What is true for our countries is also true for the world.

Far from being any form of protectionism, the Convention on Cultural Diversity will provide the instrument for surer circulation of ideas by being more respectful of others.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Step by step, a universal conscience is emerging. After fighting oppression for centuries, the international community now recognises the principles of this conscience. It has upheld the fundamental rights and freedoms formally set out in the 1948 Declaration. It then proclaimed our economic and social rights. In the face of the impoverishment and the terrible disappearance of so many languages and cultures, the international community wants to defend cultural diversity. Experience has taught us that science can be used to serve malevolent aims and the international community now feels the need for scientific ethics and rules to protect the integrity and dignity of humans.

The many outstanding achievements of life sciences in recent years hold out



prospects that no one could have dreamed of one or two generations earlier. It is becoming possible to prevent or cure hereditary diseases and those linked to ageing. We are now familiar with organ transplant techniques that save lives that earlier would have been lost. We can control fertility and we are better able to fight sterility. These scientific advances do more than just improve our health. They have changed our experience of life and death. They have led us to ask new ethical questions about what gives our societies their humanity: our values, our rights, our duties, our goals.

The past century provided an abominable example of the abuse of science. From the earliest days of genetics, Darwin's work and Mendel's discoveries were misused by politicians, ideologues and corrupt scientists to justify racist theories, massacres and the Holocaust.

We are already seeing new threats and new abuses: eugenics, discrimination based on genetic heritage, selling of gametes over the internet, "surrogate mother" services, traffic in human organs, clinics specialised in euthanasia, and medical experiments under conditions that are contrary to human dignity.

All these threats are no longer just the worries of prophets of doom. They are now real threats, inspired by a lack of morality, greed or even madness.

We have already heard sects or irresponsible scientists announce that they have impregnated women with cloned embryos. We hear of women whose poverty leads them to rent out their bodies to bring children into this world, or unfortunate people who are reduced to selling a kidney or an eye or a child.

These abuses are unacceptable. The right to security, formally proclaimed in France's own 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man, is a fundamental human right. It prohibits subjugating or selling the human body. Our bodies are always endowed with human dignity; they cannot be treated as commodities or merchandise.

In the face of such threats, reflection is as necessary and as urgent as action is. France has taken part in both for twenty years now. In 1983, France created a National Advisory Committee for Ethics in Life and Health Sciences, which has played a pioneering role. The Committee's deliberations have informed public debate and law-making in France. Other countries have established comparable institutions. Several international organisations, with UNESCO in the lead, along with the European Union, the Council of Europe and the WHO, have followed suit and drafted conventions, declarations of principle and ethical rules.

This effort needs to be based on a grand ambition, enshrined in a universally applicable instrument if it is to be effective. No matter how good our national laws are, those who want to get around them can easily find loopholes and incompatibilities. Therefore, we need to set out the principles of bioethics in international public law.

Drafting a universal framework for an ethical code that has the force of law and is recognised by all will obviously be a difficult task. We will have to reconcile differing political, philosophical and religious conceptions. We will also have to reconcile the freedom of scientific experimentation, which is necessary for progress, and the protection of human beings in investigative protocols. We have to respect the legitimate economic and commercial interests as far as they support research among other things.

Everyone appreciates the spirit of dialogue needed for the current debate about a universal ban on human reproductive cloning, which Germany and France



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initiated at the UN. The urgency of the issues requires us to reach a consensus as soon as possible. I call on everyone to act in accordance with their responsibilities.

The drafting of the Oviedo Convention can be used as a model. This instrument has now entered into force and provides the terms of reference for defining European rules and developing national bioethical standards. France will complete the process of ratifying the Convention, after amending its own bioethics legislation at the end of the year.

The Council of Europe's remarkable achievement gives us hope and inspiration. To our mind, it is not a matter of imposing a single moral code on all nations, with a list of all values and the specifics of all obligations. Instead, it is a matter of guiding advances in life sciences to ensure respect for human integrity and dignity under all circumstances. This means giving governments, scientists, doctors, laboratories and all those concerned by ethical issues terms of reference that are common to all humans.

How can we draft such an instrument? France feels that a convention would be the most successful means. One of the first steps would be to adopt a universal declaration to enshrine the founding principles. This is what the UNESCO ethics committees and Director-General recommend. This declaration could then form the foundation for a framework-convention and related protocols on more specific topics, with the later being drafted on a case-by-case basis in response to developments in medical techniques.

Many of the fundamental principles of bioethics stem from application of the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to research in human biology. But we need to identify these principles and reach an agreement on how they should be adapted. Other principles will be incorporated from the Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights adopted by your General Conference and the UN. Everyone recognises the exemplary nature of this declaration.

Under these circumstances, we should undoubtedly provide the international community with an independent body of experts with high moral values that is responsible for explaining these principles and developing new ones as needed to keep pace with scientific progress. In this way, this body could provide the governments that so wish with assistance in the drafting and the evaluation of their own laws. The experience and high quality work of the UNESCO International Bioethics Committee make it a prototype for the type of institution we have in mind.

UNESCO is the appropriate forum for drafting this text. It is appropriate because of its mission, which obviously include scientific ethics. But also because of its work, which has provided ample proof that UNESCO has the determination and the ability to tackle these issues. And because of its special nature, which combines technical competence, with a capacity for philosophical debate and political legitimacy.

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By carrying this grand project through to completion, UNESCO will remain faithful to its dual mission: protecting human dignity and promoting scientific progress. Science shall thus continue its quest for knowledge with greater assurance, based on clear ethical standards that are universally recognised to serve humankind and civilisation.



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Thank you.

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