

UNESCO'S Peace Vocation

by Alfred de Zayas,* Geneva



Alfred de Zayas
(Picture ma)

The UNESCO Constitution,¹ adopted in London on 16 November 1945, places great importance on the dialogue of civilizations and the necessity of mutual respect for the promotion of peace and prosperity through enhanced educational, scientific and cultural cooperation. The Con-

stitution, which has been amended and strengthened over the years, promotes learning about other cultures and trying to understand the perspectives of other peoples, always recognizing our commonalities as human beings and our responsibility vis-à-vis the common heritage of mankind.

Article 1 of the UNESCO Constitution proposes to achieve its aims

“by encouraging cooperation among the nations in all branches of intellectual activity, including the international exchange of persons active in the fields of education, science and culture and the exchange of publications, objects of artistic and scientific interest and other materials of information.”

The Constitution’s preamble reminds us

“that ignorance of each other’s ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind, of that suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into war.”

The Constitution’s preamble emphasizes

“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.”

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“War may sometimes be a necessary evil. But no matter how necessary, it is always an evil, never a good. We will not learn to live together in peace by killing each other’s children.”

Jimmy Carter, The Nobel Peace Prize Lecture

It also states

“that the wide diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace are indispensable to the dignity of man and constitute a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfil in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern.”

In my reports to the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council, I have frequently called for a “Global Compact on Education for Peace and Empathy, education on the common dignity of all human beings and on the common heritage of mankind”.² On 13 September 1999 the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 53/243 containing the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace,³ recalling its earlier Resolution 52/15 of 20 November 1997, by which it proclaimed the year 2000 as the “International Year for the Culture of Peace”. Article 1 of the Declaration defined a culture of peace as:

“a set of values, attitudes, traditions and modes of behaviour and ways of life based on: (a) Respect for life, ending of violence and promotion and practice of non-violence through education, dialogue and cooperation; (b) Full respect for the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of States and non-intervention in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any State, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and international law; (c) Full respect for and promotion of all human rights and fundamental freedoms; (d) Commitment to peaceful settlement of conflicts; (e) Efforts to meet the developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations; (f) Respect for and promotion of the right to development; (g) Respect for and promotion of equal rights and opportunities for women and men; (h) Respect for and promotion of the right of everyone to freedom of expression, opinion and information; (i) Adherence to the principles of freedom, justice, democracy, tolerance, solidarity, cooperation, pluralism, cultural diversity, dialogue and understanding at all levels of society and among nations; and fostered by an enabling national and international environment conducive to peace.”

For the fuller development of a culture of peace, UNESCO called for:

“(a) Promoting peaceful settlement of conflicts, mutual respect and understanding and international cooperation; (b) Complying with international obligations under the Charter of the United Nations and international law; (c) Promoting democracy, development and universal respect for and observance of all human rights and fundamental freedoms; (d) Enabling people at all levels to develop skills of dialogue, negotiation, consensus-building and peaceful resolution of differences ...”

Although the idea of building a culture of peace has been endorsed in countless UN resolutions, governments have shown complete lack of responsibility by not adopting measures conducive to confidence-building and peaceful negotiation of disputes. In fact, since the end of the Cold war, the *Francis Fukuyama* philosophy of the “End of History” has taken over the political, journalistic and academic discourse in the West. We observe a very dangerous nonchalance about provocation and escalation, particularly in the context of wars in Ukraine and the Middle East.

In December 2024 UNESCO will be holding in the Republic of Korea a Summit on the Futures of Education, under the motto “renewing the social contract for education”. H.E. Ms *Sahle-Work Zewde*, Chair of the *International Commission on the Futures of Education*, puts the emphasis on peace:

“Our hope is that the proposals contained here, and the public dialogue and collective action called for, will serve as a catalyst to shape futures for humanity and the planet that are peaceful, just, and sustainable.”⁴

It is not difficult to see how the international community has failed to live up to the noble goals of the UNESCO Constitution and of so many UNESCO Conferences and Declarations, including the 1999 Declaration on the Culture of Peace.

We are experiencing domestically and internationally a surge in political intransigence, in hate speech, in incitement to violence, rejection of mediation, refusal to negotiate. We are confronted with censorship and self-censorship, fake news, fake history, fake law, fake diplomacy, fake democracy.

We deplore the Orwellian destruction of language, cognitive dissonance, the development of a “cancel culture” that excludes persons who dare express different opinions. We witness how “groupthink” and mobbing have replaced ra-



Japanese Garden or Garden of Peace at UNESCO headquarters in Paris. (Picture Michel Ravassard/wikipedia)

tional dialogue. We decry the weaponization of human rights by governments and non-governmental organizations, the ubiquitous practice of “naming and shaming” by the media and government-funded think tanks, the politicization of sports, music, art. Instead, what humanity needs is openness and intellectual honesty, a rejection of double-standards and readiness to discuss social phenomena with a view to redressing legitimate grievances and preventing their festering into violence.

The first of my *25 Principles of International Order*, which I presented to the Human Rights Council in 2018 in my capacity as *Independent Expert on International Order* focuses on the paramount importance of peace as a human right and the necessity to promote peace at the local, regional and international level.

The United Nations Charter already commits all States to prevent conflict so as to achieve peace, justice, development and human rights. The Preamble and articles 1 and 2 of the Charter stipulate that the principal goal of the Organization is the promotion and maintenance of peace, to “save succeeding generations of the scourge



UNESCO's official founding day on 4 November 1946 in Paris. Commission meeting on official founding day.
(Picture KEYSTONE/akg-images/akg-images / Paul Almasy)

of war”.⁵ This entails the adoption of concrete measures to prevent local, regional and international conflict, and in case of armed conflict, the rapid deployment of measures aimed at achieving a cease-fire, facilitating peace negotiations, compromise, reconstruction and reconciliation.

Peace is much more than the absence of war, and necessitates an equitable world order, characterized by the gradual elimination of the root causes of conflict, including the *animus dominandi* of imperial countries, new forms of colonialism, exploitation, racism, Apartheid, extreme poverty, endemic injustice, and structural violence.

Already in 1933, the League of Nations entrusted *Albert Einstein* and *Sigmund Freud* with the question “Why War?” Their answers are as valid today as they were then.⁶ In 2017 I held up the Einstein/Freud book to the assembled diplomats at the Human Rights Council and again before the Third Committee of the General Assembly, and told the delegates in no uncertain terms that it is their responsibility to stop sabre-rattling, provocations and escalations, because such behaviour generates tension, miscalculation and constitutes a threat to international peace and security within the meaning of art-

icle 39 of the UN Charter. No one wants to stumble into a nuclear confrontation.

In order to achieve universal peace, it is necessary to create and safeguard the conditions for sustainable peace, including education for peace, economic development and progressive social legislation. The motto of the *International Labour Organization* (ILO) deserves being recognized as the universal motto of our time: *si vis pacem, cole justitiam* (if you want peace, cultivate justice). I have quoted this motto in many of my reports and publications and adapted it as follows: *si vis pacem, para pacem* – if you want peace, prepare the *conditions* for peace. I flatly reject the unethical maxim, *si vis pacem, para bellum* – if you want peace, prepare for war – which is based on a cynical view of humanity,⁷ and in any event is incompatible with the Object and Purpose of the *United Nations Organization*. I also reject the apologetics of war and the intimate relationship between war and genocide. Already in the year 98 AD Tacitus decried in his “Agricola” the propagandistic use by the Roman legions of the concept of peace: *ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant* – where they make a desert, they call it peace.⁸ That means the peace of cemeteries, as, unfortunately today in Gaza

and Lebanon, and this with the complicity of the mainstream media.

Peace must be recognized as a human entitlement, the most fundamental human right. It is also an enabling right, a pre-condition to the enjoyment of all civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights.⁹ It is time to acknowledge the richness of all cultures and civilizations and the common aspirations for a democratic and equitable international order.

UNESCO Constitution and the UN Charter

The UNESCO Constitution is most akin to the UN Charter in its commitment to advance international understanding on the basis of the principles of the sovereign equality of States and the self-determination of peoples. Both the UNESCO and the UN are committed to work together to maintain local, regional, and international peace, to further the right to development and promote the enjoyment of all human rights by all peoples.

All States are required to practice mutual respect, refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of other states, refrain from imposing unilateral coercive measures, which doubles constitute the “use of force” within the meaning of article 2(4) of the UN Charter.

The General Assembly's *Summit for the Future*¹⁰ held in New York on 20–21 September 2024 had enormous potential, but the *Pact for the Future*¹¹ adopted at the Summit did not do justice to the burning problems of our day. Far more than a “Summit for the Future”, humanity needs a “Summit for the Present”, a concrete, implementable, pragmatic plan of action to stop armed conflicts throughout the world, including in Ukraine, Israel, and Sudan, a blueprint for sustainable peace, a program for reconstruction and reconciliation.

Admittedly, the *Global Digital Compact* and a *Declaration on Future Generations* hold much promise, but more urgently we need to ensure the enforcement of existing international law treaties, including the two *UN Human Rights Covenants* and the *Geneva Convention*. We need implementation of the Judgments, Orders and Advisory Opinions of the *International Court of Justice*. We need responsibility in world governance, transparency, accountability and a return to the spirituality of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

More than anything else we need pro-active mediation by the United Nations Secretary Gen-

eral, by regional groups including ASEAN,¹² the *Shanghai Cooperation Organization*,¹³ the *African Union*,¹⁴ the *European Union*,¹⁵ the *Community of Latin America and Caribbean States*,¹⁶ and the *Organization of American States*.¹⁷

As a veteran of more than fifty years in the field of human rights, as a former Independent Expert, former senior lawyer with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, president of human rights NGO's, professor of human rights law, I regret to say that UN inaction in multiple crises have significantly detracted from its authority and credibility. It is up to us to fix this and do more than just give lip service to human rights.

Pax optima rerum.¹⁸ Peace is the highest good. It is also the *Raison d'être* of the United Nations, whose Charter must be seen as akin to a world constitution, the only rules based international order that humanity has. The interests of all of mankind converge on the necessity of preventing World War III, ending armed conflict and engaging in rational negotiations as stipulated in article 2(3) of the UN Charter, with political will and a readiness to compromise. There is no justification for refusing to negotiate.

Peace is a precondition to the exercise of civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights.¹⁹ We urgently need disarmament for development. Otherwise, there is zero chance of ever achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.²⁰

A fundamental condition for disarmament is mutual trust and verifiable agreements, including on nuclear disarmament. Therefore, confidence-building measures must be facilitated by the United Nations and all regional organizations. The alternative to confidence-building is fear-mongering and gambling with the future of mankind. Alas, this is what we are witnessing today, with the world getting closer and closer to a nuclear confrontation and the destruction of the planet.

The pervasive war-mongering and demonization of adversaries must end. Art. 20 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* stipulates:²¹

- “1. Any propaganda for war shall be prohibited by law.
2. Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.”

Quite concretely this requires an immediate cessation of provocations and a phasing out of virulent Russophobia, Sinophobia, and Islamophobia, which are practiced not only by politicians,

but also by the mainstream media. The *International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia* and the *International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda* established pertinent jurisprudence on the issue of complicity in war crimes and crimes against humanity. This jurisprudence applies to the conflicts in Ukraine and in the Middle East.

The UN General Assembly and UN Human Rights Council have adopted resolutions on the right to peace,²² but instead of working toward peace and understanding, governments are engaging in bellicose rhetoric and increasing the military share of national budgets at the expense of education, healthcare, housing, sanitation and infrastructure. Instead of advancing the SDGs, governments are squandering resources in wars, missiles, drones, fighter jets, submarines and even biological and chemical weapons.

Instead of addressing the root causes of conflict, governments are escalating. Every provocation entails a violation of article 2(4) UN Charter, which prohibits not only the use of force, but also the threat thereof. My 2014 report to the HR Council²³ focused on the necessity to convert military-first economies into human security economies.

Conclusion

The future of all humanity depends on ensuring peace. Alas, there is scarce chance of implementation of the UN Charter and UNESCO Constitution unless the major powers abandon their dangerous warmongering and recognize that it is impossible to achieve sustainable peace by waging war. We the peoples, members of civil society, must find ways to persuade governments to build bridges of understanding, enhance cooperation and achieve friendship – not just tolerance. That is why a *Global Compact for Education for Peace* has become so necessary.

It bears repeating what the first paragraph of the UNESCO Constitution tells us:

“Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.”

In this sense, it is appropriate to conclude by citing from President *John F. Kennedy's* commencement address delivered on 10 June 1963 at American University in Washington, D.C.:²⁴

“Above all, while defending our own vital interests, nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a hu-

miliating retreat or a nuclear war. To adopt that kind of course in the nuclear age would be evidence only of the bankruptcy of our policy – or of a collective death-wish for the world.”

Source: <https://www.counterpunch.org/2024/10/18/unescos-peace-vocation/>, 18 October 2024

¹ <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/constitution>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btUDPmKlfdo>

³ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/299381?v=pdf>

⁴ <https://www.unesco.org/en/renewing-education-transform-future>

<https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.org/2024/10/03/update-unesco-international-forum-on-the-futures-of-education-2024-republic-of-korea/>

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⁵ <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>

⁶ Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Why War, International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, League of Nations, Geneva, 1933. <https://courier.unesco.org/en/articles/why-war-letter-albert-einstein-sigmund-freud>

⁷ <https://www.counterpunch.org/2022/11/03/the-good-and-the-bad-in-latin-maxims/>

⁸ <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7524/7524-h/7524-h.htm>

⁹ Alfred de Zayas, “Peace” in William Schabas (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to International Criminal Law*, Cambridge 2016, pp. 97–116

¹⁰ <https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future>

¹¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/09/1154671>

¹² <https://asean.org/>

¹³ <https://eng.sectsco.org/>

¹⁴ <https://au.int/>

¹⁵ https://european-union.europa.eu/index_en

¹⁶ <https://caricom.org/institutions/the-community-of-latin-american-and-caribbean-states-celac/>

¹⁷ <https://www.oas.org/en/>

¹⁸ Motto of the Peace of Westphalia of 1648.

¹⁹ <https://www.counterpunch.org/2022/11/11/peace-as-a-human-right/>, See also chapter 3 of *Building a Just World Order*, Clarity Press, Atlanta 2021.

²⁰ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

²¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

²² <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/advisory-committee/right-to-peace>

²³ <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g14/087/30/pdf/g1408730.pdf>

²⁴ <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/american-university-19630610>