

The Primacy of Ethics

My experience as Director of UNESCO's Division of Intercultural Dialogue and the *Intercultural Dialogue Routes* projects, as well as my role as UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, has allowed me to identify three dimensions of culture that are particularly relevant to promoting the fundamental message of UNESCO's Founding Fathers: "*Building peace in the minds of men and women.*" These dimensions are the aesthetic, the ethical, and the spiritual.

The aesthetic dimension, encompassing all forms of cultural expression, represents the initial terrain where individuals perceive cultural otherness in an immediate, sensory manner and where collective or national identity is constructed. Often, intercultural dialogue has been framed primarily through this aesthetic lens.

The second dimension, the ethical, concerns the moral values that underpin human dignity and give anchor to each people, community, and group. This dimension constitutes, the depth and over time, the force that gives meaning and substance to the construction of a singular humanity. Ethics is what shapes human relationships and the structures of society. It is within the realm of ethics that deep and lasting understanding occurs, where people can engage in a fruitful encounter and ultimately recognize their shared humanity beyond the diversity of their cultural and aesthetic expressions. This, therefore, is the most fertile ground for resisting inhumanity and its systemic manifestations.

Finally, the third and deepest dimension of culture is the spiritual, which underpins belief, an intimate adherence to a transcendent reality that explains and gives meaning to life. Nourishing ethics and expressed through aesthetics, the spiritual is the intangible and primary source of cultural identities. It is at this level that societies sustain their deepest resilience, especially in the face of historical atrocities and contemporary challenges.

Indeed, the world today is confronting simultaneity and multiplicity of *crises*—economic, environmental, political, and social, which are not isolated disruptions but interconnected symptoms of deeper structural injustice. These crises expose the erosion of and spiritual foundations, as societies increasingly prioritize economic efficiency over human dignity.

Such erosion is particularly evident in the persistence of racism, colonial legacies, and institutional discrimination, which continue to violate all three dimensions of culture. Racism distorts aesthetics by enforcing racial hierarchies and stereotypes. It corrupts ethics by legitimizing oppression and exclusion. And it undermines spirituality, severing human beings from their fundamental interconnectedness.

The expansion of neoliberal economic structures has further entrenched these dynamics. The market's dominance over cultural production, through the privatization of education, the monopolization of media, and the colonization of knowledge creation and dissemination, has prioritized aesthetic production over ethical and spiritual depth. This commodification of culture privileges spectacle over substance, reducing cultural identity to a mere tool of economic power while marginalizing deeper moral and spiritual values.

Thus the crisis of values is not only social and economic, but also epistemic and existential. The persistence of racial injustice, economic exploitation, and cultural alienation is a sign not of stagnation, but of an urgent call for deep transformation. Just as past systems of oppression have been challenged and dismantled, the current crises signal the urgency of redefining our ethical and spiritual foundations.

To conclude, I offer an African metaphor of the tree, a symbol of a common humanity rooted in ethics and spirituality: *"In the forest, when the branches of trees quarrel, their roots embrace."* Here, the branches represent diverse cultures, which may sometimes clash, while the roots symbolize universal human values—our shared humanity—which remain deeply intertwined.

The challenge before us is to ensure that the trunk—society, through education and social transformation, nourishes both the branches—cultural diversity and the roots—universal ethics founded upon a spiritual foundation. This way, each branch—each community, each culture, each tradition—finds its strength not in isolation, but in its interconnectedness with the whole.

This vision of a spiritually grounded, ethically inspired, and aesthetically enriched common humanity is thoroughly explored by the contributors of this book *Beyond Inhumanity*.

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