



PR/08/2012

MEDIA RELEASE

“Humanism is the closest we can get to a universal good”
– Ambassador Dayan Jayatilleka at Russian Centre in Paris



Ambassador Dayan Jayatilleka participated as a panelist at the international conference on “**21st Century, Towards the New Humanism**” on 23rd January 2012 at the Russian Centre for Science and Culture. The event gathered dignitaries as well as Russian and French scholars and researchers.

The initiative was organized by the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to UNESCO, the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and for International Humanitarian Cooperation Mission Rossotrudničestvo in France, and the Russian Centre for Science and Culture. The event

took place with the support of UNESCO, the International Humanist and Ethical Union, and the European Humanist Federation Russian Humanist Society.

The object of this two-day seminar (23rd January - 24th January 2012) is to support UNESCO in its initiative for a New Humanism for the sake of bettering conditions for intercultural dialogue and solidarity. The discussion also intends to prepare the possibility of holding –together with the Spanish Forum “NUNC!”- a broader conference on New Humanism in Moscow in autumn 2012.

Dr. Jayatilleka’s speech was delivered during the first session chaired by Mr. Hans d’Orville (Assistant Director-General for Strategic Planning of UNESCO). Among the conference participants were: H.E. Ion de la Riva (Spain/UNESCO), Jean-Luc Nahel (Councilor, Conference of Presidents of French Universities) and Efim Pivovarov (President of Russian State Humanitarian University).

Speaking on New Humanism Ambassador Jayatilleka emphasized on the need to place the human being at the center: “[...] **humanism is the closest we can get to universal good, to a universal idea. Humanism puts the human being at the center. And placing the human being at the center means to recognize that above all else, beyond national, ethnic, political, civilizational, religious, systemic, and ideological differences, one thing unites us and that is that we are all human.**”

Also participating in this seminar were: Prof. V. A. Kouvakine (Professor, Lomonosov Moscow State University and President of Russian Humanist Society), Prof. D.A.Leontiev (Professor of

psychology, Lomonosov Moscow State University; Head of the research lab of positive psychology and quality of life studies, Higher School of Economics, Moscow), Prof. Alexander Razin (Professor Lomonosov Moscow State University), Prof. Yaroslav Golovin (Professor of Moscow State Open University), Olga Pastushkova (PhD, Vice-President of Russian Humanist Society), Julia Senchikhina (PhD, Vice-Director General, Institute for Humanist Studies Foundation, Russia), Dr. Alexandra Otchirova (Doctor in Philosophy) and Farit Moukhametshine (Head of the Federal Agency 'Rossotrudničestvo').

[Please find below full statement of Ambassador Dayan Jayatilleka]



“21st Century, Towards the New Humanism”, at the Russian Centre for Science and Culture Paris, January 23, 2012

My thanks to the Russian Cultural Centre but also to UNESCO. I am particularly thankful to the Russian Cultural Centre because Russian culture, as Ambassador Ion de la Riva said with reference to Russian literature and Tolstoy in particular, is profoundly humanistic. I would also like to make the point that Russian political ideas have had a strong streak of humanism. We think of Herzen, we think of the Decembrists and we understand that a progressive, rational, radical humanism was very much part of Russian ideas.

I would also like to say something heretical, in a critical defense of the Russian Revolution because the Russian Revolution takes place in a context of the greatest degeneration and decomposition of humanism, the greatest challenge to humanism the world has witnessed, and that is the First World War. It is against the historical backdrop of this crisis of ideology, this ruination

and negation of humanism, that you have the radical response of the Russian Revolution. The Russian Revolution itself was a radical variant of humanism. I think the tragedy of the Revolution is when it deviated from its humanistic roots and inspiration. The tragedy of the Revolution was the anti-humanistic aspect, but this was not the totality of the Russian Revolution. I would also like to say that those who defended Moscow, those who defended Leningrad, those who defended Stalingrad, in the face of the worst threat to humanism, that is Nazi-fascism, were also inspired by spirit of humanism and were defending the heritage of humanism in Europe and the world. So I would like to pay my tribute to the Russian people, Russian culture, Russian history and Russian ideas, from the perspective precisely of humanism.

I think that rediscovering and advancing humanism provides us with a valuable opportunity. It is an answer to the crisis of ideas, to the crisis of philosophy, the crisis of ethics, the crisis of attitudes, that is part of the global crisis today. Why do I say that humanism provides us with opportunities? Because, humanism is the closest we can get to a universal good, to a universal idea! Humanism puts the human being at the center. Placing the human being at the center means to recognize that above all else, beyond national, ethnic, political, cultural, civilizational, religious, systemic, and ideological differences, one thing unites us and that is that we are all human. So long as we respect that fact, that above all else, and in the final analysis, we are human, we are able to connect, to communicate, to seek common solutions. This is why I find the search for a humanistic worldview to be, not only some ideal exercise but a very practical answer to the global crisis of today.

I also feel that there are material reasons that make this possible -namely the information revolution, the interconnectedness that you see in the world today through the new information technology. What does this mean? It means that we are relating to each other as individuals, we are communicating as human beings to other human beings real-time, across vast distances. So perhaps for the first time we also have the material means, in terms of the means of communication, to make humanism a reality! Because the technology exists, the means of production of ideas exist, in a manner that they did not exist before.

Now, what is, or should be, new about the New Humanism? The New Humanism has to be universalistic. Of course we understand and recognize the powerful roots of humanism from within the Western and specially the Western European tradition, but I would say that part of our project has to be to interrogate all existing ideologies, ideas from all parts of the world and seek out their humanistic kernel, the humanistic core, the humanistic aspects. It was said that Marx took the rational core of Hegel; took the method that abandoned the system. I think a similar exercise is necessary to go through the heritage of Latin America, Africa and Asia; the heritage in literature, the heritage in political ideas, the heritage in social ideas, the heritage even in forms of social systems, and try to uncover, try to unpack, try to deconstruct them, so you can find a humanistic core, if it exists, and carry it forward. Of course you will not find it in Nazism, in fascism, but in many traditions you find if you seek in terms of, shall we say, an archeology of knowledge, you will find this humanistic core.

My esteemed colleague, Ambassador Ion de la Riva of Spain has already referred to the Buddha. In Buddhism it is said "May all living beings be happy". Now this to me shows a broad universal humanism. If you take Christianity, and there are many references which would constitute lead to a Christian Humanism. The Christ after all, called himself the Son of Man. The idea, 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you', the dictum that you should 'love your neighbor as yourself' and to me the very important proposition that 'the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath' constitute a humanism. If the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath, this is also true of religious rituals, of religious institutions, and it is also true for States. States were made for humankind, for man and woman, not man and woman for the State! This is not to say that we must defend the idea that the State should not exist and that the market should be everything. No. The market was also made for man, just as the State was made for man. If we

can remember that, that it extends beyond the Sabbath and that the human should be at the center, then we would understand that you can have a Christian reading and a reading of Christianity that are profoundly humanistic.

That is true also of socialism because just as humanism deals with the Rights of Man as individuals, it must also talk about the rights, responsibilities and duties of Man, of humans, in the collective. We know that in the Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizens proclaimed here in Paris in 1789, you have as Article 3, the notion that 'all sovereignty flows from the nation'. So we must not counterpose the rights of man to the sovereignty of the nation as some liberal or ultra-liberals do. However, this is also not to put the nation above man, but to find a synthesis. In socialism, you have a humanism focused on the collective dimension of human existence. There now has to be a reintegration of humanism in its individual and its collective dimensions. Where socialism failed was when it failed to make the transition from defending and fighting for the rights of man in the collective; failed to reintegrate into that project the rights of man as individual; failed to make the point that while the State is important, the State is made for man and not man for State. But there is a valuable humanistic core within of socialism, within the heritage if I may say so, of communism- and that humanistic core has to be extracted. Marx did say that man made history but not under circumstances determined or chosen by himself. So he gave a place for man as the maker of history and he sought to make man the master of history, but he also recognized that there were powerful systemic and structural constraints. These two, the motive force that is man at the center, and on the other hand the systemic and structural constraints that man find himself under; this antinomy, this contradiction, has to be held in equilibrium.

I would bring it altogether and say that today, now, *nunc*, is the time to recognize that humanism is a universalism, and this is the closest we can get to universality because it places the human at the center and it understands and values our common humanity, the fact that we are all human beings. We place that as the highest value. If we understand that we must give primacy not only to man and woman as individuals but also, and equally, to man and woman as citizen, and man and woman in his/her collective existence, then we will have the foundation stones of and the stepping stones to a better and different future.

Embassy of Sri Lanka
Paris

26th January 2012