



**Intervention by the Ambassador Louise V. Oliver,
Permanent Delegate of the United States of America**

**UNESCO Executive Board, Programs and External Relations Commission
April 23, 2003**

Ethics-COMEST (Item 3.6.1)

Background: The Director General reported to the Executive Board on the evaluation of the impact of the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST), a sub-organ of UNESCO [165 EX/Decision 3.4.3 and 32C/ Resolution 26].

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Since I am so new to this body, I still have a great deal to learn about its priorities and programs. Although some of my distinguished colleagues have told me that it takes many years to really understand this complex organization, UNESCO, I hope that will not be the case, as we have a great deal of important work that needs to be done – particularly in the area of ethics.

COMEST [World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology] is an initiative that I was not familiar with until recently, so I appreciated the comprehensive nature of this report. Given the rapidity of advances in science and technology, I agree with many of my distinguished colleagues that it is entirely appropriate that we focus on the role of ethics in this area. The fact that a scientist is now capable of doing something does not necessarily mean that he should do it. As the largest and most important intellectual body in the world, UNESCO through its moral leadership can make a positive contribution to the development of ethical principles within UNESCO's area of competence that can inform our work so a close relationship with COMEST could be very helpful.

Clearly COMEST is focusing on a critical and fascinating area, and initiatives such as a possible code of ethics for scientists are definitely worth discussing. However, as I read the material and saw a reference to a possible legal instrument, I felt my initial enthusiasm become tinged with wariness.

Immediately I was reminded of a donor's conference on volunteerism that I attended several years ago. Shortly after the conference began, one of the participants stated that volunteerism was so important that it should be made mandatory. Needless to say, requiring volunteerism to be mandatory destroys the very essence of the concept.

I understand that an important part of UNESCO's mandate is in the areas of standards setting. However, when we discuss important philosophical and ethical concepts and challenges, we should try to avoid the temptation that just because something is important, it should be made mandatory, but instead to try to focus on our discussions and initiatives in ways that take full advantage of the moral power and influence of this organization, which is a result of its universality and the principle of consensus that underpins its work.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.