

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the International Conference
“For an Islam of Peace: The meeting of Islam and the West”

Your Highness,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to inaugurate this International Conference organized by the Terres d'Europe association, in the presence of His Royal Highness Prince Hassan of Jordan, in connection with UNESCO's programme of interreligious dialogue "Spiritual convergence and intercultural dialogue". Allow me to hail the efforts of the Terres d'Europe association, of its Honorary President, Mr Sheikh Adlen Khaled Bentounes, and of its President, Ms Betoule Lambiotte, the organizer of these Days.

The subject before us is highly topical. The nightmare of the Cold War has fortunately dissipated, but the same cannot be said of the many territorial, ethnic and religious conflicts which continue to thrive here and there on the fertile ground of intolerance and hatred.

I am particularly alive to the theme of this conference, "For an Islam of Peace: The meeting of Islam and the West", since it ties in with one of my profound convictions, one that I have tried to put into practice throughout my career: the need to work for the mutual, constant advancement of all human cultures through their spiritual and moral unity. For identity and memory are indeed the issues central to inter-faith dialogue.

My experience as a witness of the horrors of war and subsequently as a diplomat having taken an active part in international events has convinced me that knowledge of the culture of the Other, genuine attention to the Other, is the only means of dispelling hatred and distrust, and hence the only real tool with which to build a lasting peace.

In saying that, I cannot help thinking of a striking illustration that is of great contemporary relevance. I refer to the efforts of President Bouteflika to re-establish civil concord and restore dialogue in his country, Algeria. I take the opportunity of welcoming the presence here among us of the representative of President Bouteflika.

Most religious conflicts spring from the same source, namely, a blinkered attachment to a single religion or spiritual tradition, to the exclusion of any other. Over and above the political factors to be spotted here and there, these instances of antagonistic cultural isolationism are due to ignorance of the long history that links together cultures, religions and spiritual traditions.

It is just this work of remembering the past that UNESCO is seeking to promote in its approach to intercultural dialogue and the dialogue of civilizations. The essential requirement is to clarify, through education, science, culture and communication, the fruitful reality of these interactions and of cultural and spiritual pluralism.

UNESCO attaches all the more importance to this debate in that, for many years, political questions have been very much in the limelight, thereby overshadowing the albeit essential concerns of a spiritual kind.

The industrial and economic development of the second half of the twentieth century has likewise commanded attention to the detriment of spiritual, philosophical and ethical issues.

The migratory movement from the Muslim southern shore of the Mediterranean to the European States, following the Second World War, was a direct consequence of that industrial development. The outcome has been an ethnic and religious intermixing and a lasting contact between Muslims from the Maghreb and a largely Christian population of Europe. It has amounted, so to speak, to a first interregional-scale globalization that has gathered momentum.

Globalization is now fuelling fears worldwide of uncontrollable social and economic upheavals and of materialistic saturation. We are consequently witnessing a new focus on basic spiritual values.

It is in connection with the transdisciplinary programme “Towards a culture of peace” that UNESCO has implemented the interreligious dialogue programme “Spiritual convergence and intercultural dialogue”, together with the “Roads of Faith” and “Roads of Al-Andalus” projects.

The “Roads of Faith” project was launched, in 1992, to throw light on the major contribution of religious and spiritual traditions in the quest for peace. The programme sought to establish a framework enabling new avenues to be explored for a dialogue between cultures, civilizations and spiritual values as a prime means of peace-building.

Similarly, the “Roads of Al-Andalus” project provides an illustration, through the rewarding experience of medieval Spain, the first point of contact between the West and Islam, of a possible model of intercommunity coexistence, with both its splits and its lasting interactions. This project is intended to draw attention to the old, deep-rooted resonance of Islam in Europe, and in particular the spiritual pluralism of the West.

The International Conference “For an Islam of Peace” comes as a welcome extension of the reflection and action of both these UNESCO major projects for intercultural and inter-faith dialogue, by suggesting lines of approach to a fresh concept of an Islam of Europe, resolutely moving towards modernity and the future, yet nevertheless attached to its spiritual and traditional values and to the memory and heritage of its past.

This conference is taking place at a time when the international community is celebrating the International Year for the Culture of Peace, proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations, and is preparing to celebrate in 2001 the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. It is my earnest hope that its work may be successful and help to advance knowledge of the fruitful interactions between Islam and the West.

Thank you.