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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
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Address by
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on the occasion of the Round Table on the
« Dialogue among Civilizations »

United Nations Headquarters, New York
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Mr President of the Islamic Republic of Iran,
Honourable Heads of State,
Honourable Ministers,
Mr Secretary General of the United Nations,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are assembled here because in November 1998, the General Assembly of the United Nations, in a resolution sponsored by the Islamic Republic of Iran, proclaimed the year 2001 as the “United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations”.

Active, mutually enriching exchange between cultures is not only a matter for urgent debate, and one so deeply essential to furthering peace between nations and peoples. It also lies at the very core of both our mandates - the United Nations', and UNESCO's - dedicated to strengthening “*peace and security by promoting collaboration among nations through education, science and culture, in order to further universal respect for justice, the rule of law, human rights, and fundamental freedoms...*”.

We pause, as it were, for a moment of reflection, at this symbolic threshold between centuries, on the eve of the World Millennium Summit : not only to explore one another's past legacies, but to forecast what future may lie in store for our diverse civilizations, values, and creeds - the living tissue of humanity's very existence on earth.

I wish to thank all those who have made such a meeting possible, and also pay particular tribute to the Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr Kofi Annan; to President Mohammad Khatami of the Islamic Republic of Iran for his initiative and contribution to this event, and the distinguished Heads of State and Ministers gathered here.

In today's hardheaded, practical world, do such questions as dialogue and exchange between civilizations still make relevant sense ? Of course they do. The mood of the time is anxious. The curtain rises on a new millennium of mingled hopes and fears – but the fears are as palpable, and as widespread, as the hopes. United Nations members can hardly ignore them. New technologies in instantaneous communication provide unlimited access to knowledge – but those excluded sink into an ever deeper technological gap.

We are all, consciously, living in an age of what we call accelerating « globalization ». In its most positive meaning, the term implies the unity of our

single species' fate in our common biosphere. But globalization also carries a hint of menace : as if to designate irresistible economic forces sweeping away all time-honoured local standards, bearings, and sheltering values.

In a word, globalization must be humanized - harnessed to the yearnings of men and women, not the other way around - and eyes turn to UNESCO with its own quite special cultural mandate. We know that human beings recognize their identity through the cultures which have nourished them. Their sense of worth and personal dignity very much lies in recognition, by others, of the special contribution that each and all - women and men, majorities and minorities - have made and must continue to make to the rich tapestry of the world's civilizations.

One of the very purposes for which the United Nations' educational, scientific and cultural organization – UNESCO – was created in 1945, was to help convey regard for the value and variety of the world's civilizations, through the world's schools. Through education, we must learn to recognize what each culture owes to all other cultures. Awareness of each others' strands in our common heritage contributes to lift curtains of ignorance, scorn, and hate, and weaves a richer legacy for us all.

We know that civilizations endlessly change and take on new patterns, as they redefine themselves in light of new surrounding requirements and moral standards. The growth of such notions as a universal human family, with universally shared rights, may be traced - like the story of science itself - through the struggles and intellectual breakthroughs of all of history's different civilizations. While some cultures did experience long periods of geographical isolation, most have traded goods, habits, ideas, scripts, philosophies, crafts, works of art, and scientific concepts, for hundreds and even thousands of years.

The planet is an organic unit, and globalization has been proceeding, in actual fact, for a very long time - as human beings progressively learned to tread every path on the earth's surface, then to navigate all its seas, finally to fly all its skies. Civilizations are fertile mixtures - there is no such thing as a "pure" culture - and all have borrowed from one another well before our age of electronic communications.

Variety in the human heritage has been compared to the biodiversity of the earth itself - which is precisely what makes up its vital unity. This is why we should risk dangerous spiritual impoverishment to allow so many flowers of the human mind, some of them hardly recorded yet, to be nipped for all time.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Only dialogue ends war, and the dialogue of peace is very much a cultural dialogue as well. Many nations and peoples nurse memories of historic grievances and cultural sleights. Dialogue alone brings these clearly into the open, where they may be assessed with full intellectual honesty and deep concern for one another's merits. Only so can past wrongs be finally laid to rest. Cultural dialogue thus helps dispel the germs of war, and sows the seeds of peace - and any chance for lasting, harmonious development. UNESCO is one of the world's forums for such dialogue. The dialogue it fosters is predicated upon universal acceptance and observance of basic human rights, as enshrined by the Universal Declaration of 1948, to which all the Organization's members are committed. Within this broad moral framework, each culture knows that its voice is heard, weighed, and respected.

Dialogue, in itself, means harmonizing – certainly not blanketing over – mutually enlightening ways of thought. Cultures, while borrowing from one another, have usually conflicted violently. Cultural modesty is called for, in order to learn from others. This is what I hope we can do this morning, and again this afternoon with the gathering of scholars and thinkers, whose presence here today I should also like to salute.

To conclude on a contemporary note : schoolchildren's giggles in the play-yard sound the same the world over. But so do the moans of war-wounded under bombed rubble. The first observation is striking but trite ; the second suggests a sinister connection : are the chances of war between adults made worse by prejudices taught in youth ? One wishes to see this unfolding dialogue among civilizations contribute to dissipate such a nightmare. Meetings like this are among the freshest, most exciting ideas of our time. It is fitting that it be held in the halls of the United Nations : which is the family of nations.

Thank you.