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

at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies

Oxford, United Kingdom, 5 February 2001

Mr Director,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

The invitation extended to me today to address the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies is profoundly gratifying and, indeed, especially meaningful and timely, in light of the United Nations General Assembly's dedication of precisely this year 2001 as one of "dialogue among civilizations".

The idea for this boldly imaginative resolution was in fact first sponsored in November 1998 by the authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran, one of the members of the great family of Muslim nations extending across the globe from the Atlantic shores of Africa to the islands of the South China Sea.

Islam is one of the major living spiritual traditions of our world. It is an essential partner in any vital dialogue between our planet's cultures. This is why, on behalf of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, I should like to express my thanks to Dr Farhân Ahmad Nizâmî, Director of the Centre in this world-famous seat of learning, for providing this precious opportunity to exchange views with you.

For those of us who stem from a different spiritual family, whether Christian or Hindu, Jewish or, in my case, Buddhist, to join in dialogue with thinkers committed to Islam, or closely involved in Islamic issues, is to come philosophically to grips with the very heart of the issues of this International Year.

The idea of a "dialogue among civilizations" is no mere catch-phrase or trite political slogan. It is an invitation for us all mentally to leap over our ancient cultural divides in order better to understand not only one another's world-view and sense of right and wrong, but also our irreplaceable respective contributions to our common humanity's pooled cultural heritage. For all our civilizations have borrowed from one another and thereby been mutually enriched. To acknowledge such vital borrowings is invariably enlightening, for it teaches us to view our human experience from different angles and contrasting perspectives: and thus in far greater relief and depth.

This is why the notion of dialogue implies much more than tolerance. It is something more active, more volitional, predicated on respect and a willingness to learn – and such respect for every cultural family's full human dignity and distinct individuality, in turn, constitutes an essential prerequisite to what we at

UNESCO call a “culture of peace”. The more deeply we understand one another, the greater our imaginative sympathy, and the less we give way to facile prejudice or hate.

Today’s abiding inter-cultural tensions throughout the world are usually rooted in some particular long-standing resentment, in a sense or memory of some perceived historic wrong or grievance suffered by one community at the hands of another. Only dialogue can ever allow such ancient sleights to be aired, addressed, resolved and finally laid to rest, to the mutual benefit of us all. And only dialogue permits resumption of desperately needed cultural exchange, if we want today’s globalization of communications and material goods to nourish, and not to smother, the heritage of our various civilizations in all their creative diversity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Islam for the last fourteen centuries has been one of the leading creative forces of this planet. It requires no particular specialization in Islamic languages, literature, history, aesthetics or thought, to appreciate the contribution of Muslims to the world’s store of philosophy and architecture, mathematics or advanced agriculture. When I calculate an equation, peer through a microscope or admire a perfect dome, I can be grateful for the pioneering work carried out many centuries ago by al-Khwârizmî, the Central Asian creator of algebra, by Ibn al-Haytham, the Egyptian wizard in optics, or by Sinân, Turkey’s greatest builder of mosques. To be able to cite names like these as a matter of course in any educated international gathering – outside of narrow scholarly or specifically Muslim circles – should be no sign of exotic learning or pedantic affectation. It is rather a demonstration of the respect due to eminent members of the great creative human family of scientists and engineers. Quite as eminent, in terms of mathematical or architectural achievement, as Archimedes or Leonardo, as the Hindu arithmetician Brahmagupta, or his Chinese counterpart Zhu Shijie. In literature and speculation too, spiritual and artistic summits have been repeatedly attained by gifted Muslim mystics and poets, both women and men, whose works truly belong to the treasure of world song.

We hope one day to see the time when schoolchildren everywhere could quote all these names with equal familiarity!

As we enter into an age of global communication, peoples everywhere are taking a fresh look at the great cultural zones that make up our common world.

At a far deeper level, we are all beginning to grasp that every cultural manifestation in world history, wherever it has occurred, has subtly influenced cultural patterns everywhere else. We in Japan, for example, may be directly and sharply aware of the impact upon us of modern Western civilization: yet even we are coming to learn that a major formative component of the contemporary West - that has helped mould us - was provided by the intellectual ferment of medieval Islamic Spain, which itself drew so deeply on the thought of ancient Greece. This is the central truth imparted by all great endeavours of cultural study like those pursued here in Oxford: to find out about the significant achievements of others is to discover far more about ourselves and what went into making us what we are.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Modern Islam is recognizably in spiritual crisis and moral upheaval. It has been so for close to a century – at the very least. The Islamic Republic of Iran’s call for this “dialogue among civilizations” - that is, among explicitly *equal* civilizations - to which the international community has unequivocally responded - is perhaps a first healing step towards better mutual comprehension: and hence, towards effecting real peace *in the minds of men*, as UNESCO’s founding motto so well puts it. But sound dialogue can only be based on honest, absolutely candid appraisal of the issues.

The New York Round Table last September gave the International Year excellent momentum. It brought together many world leaders from all corners of the earth, as well as a swathe of academics and intellectuals. The debates were varied and dense. In short, it was what it set out to be: at the same time an enriching and fruitful dialogue *per se* and an immensely thought-provoking debate *on* dialogue.

Some speakers were of the view that such dialogue began through “sweeping in front of their own doorsteps”. Others emphasized the imperative of an international setting to give the necessary momentum to such exchange.

To be sure, dialogue begins at home. It is a matter which directly concerns individuals, communities and society as a whole. At a very basic level, it means a commitment to listen to each other, to hear what the other has to say. It requires renewed commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms, democracy, and good governance.

This is no doubt, in many places, an ambitious and daunting enterprise. But modern pluralistic societies, if they wish to ensure peace and to preserve the well-being of their citizens, cannot afford to pay the price of cultural monologue or cultural fundamentalism, which are seedbeds of conflicts and war.

At the same time, with the impact of cultures and civilizations now transcending the borders of nation states on such a scale and with such speed, it is also - more than ever - indispensable to establish and enrich dialogue at the international level. The dizzying pace of globalization and of the information revolution is creating conditions for unprecedented meetings of cultures and individuals. That is why globalization can be an advantage to us all, if it is allowed to thrive on dialogue, interaction and exchange.

UNESCO's work in this area is important, because it brings together expertise in the areas of education, science and culture at a time when we can no longer afford to confine these issues within sectoral walls. It is shouldering increased responsibilities as the world community seeks to come to terms with the effects of globalization. And the Organization is itself learning what challenges are involved in addressing these issues innovatively and constructively.

Dialogue is behind the very idea of "*learning to live together*", as the Delors Report on Education for the 21st Century put it. It must be at the heart of our efforts to tackle the challenges facing societies – from poverty to information technologies – so many of which require global commitments, concerted approaches, and internationally-recognized norms and codes of conduct.

Education is therefore the pivot. It is an essential means to promote dialogue while helping to remove the roots of ignorance, prejudice, intolerance and conflict. Achieving constructive dialogue means, for example, improving educational contents. Just think of the difference it would make if all school text-books were revised to reflect the contributions of all cultures and peoples, and to remove from them the expressions of prejudice and intolerance which fire incomprehension, mistrust, even hatred.

Increasing academic cooperation and mobility of teachers and researchers worldwide would be another step in the right direction, especially between developed and developing countries, through the establishment of University partnerships, Chairs and research networks.

Learning to live together, learning to dialogue, learning to understand one another: the exchange and propagation of knowledge about diverse cultural traditions constitutes a key – and all too often a neglected one – as we seek to lay the foundations of dialogue. What better way than to marvel at the cultural wonders of other peoples? Hence the importance of mobilizing the international community around the preservation of our heritage in all its forms. The world has magnificent cultural monuments and sites; and Nature has provided it with wonders beyond limit and of unfathomable diversity. We are now increasingly turning our attention to the safeguarding and promotion of the intangible human heritage - such as traditional crafts, oral traditions, all forms of artistic expression, or indeed the world's traditional and local knowledge systems – recognized now by the scientific community as dynamic expressions of our perception and understanding of the world.

Institutions of learning such as yours are doing fine work to this end. As you do so, you should also seek to break down the walls of ignorance, helping to disseminate the results of your research in society through efforts at popularization - without compromising quality. You, too, indeed, can help ensure that al-Khwârizmî, Archimedes, Brahmagupta and Zhu Shijie are names that all trip off our children's lips with ease.

Our shrinking “e-planet” could place much of this in jeopardy, and there is an urgent call from the very hearts of many communities and societies for due attention to what is genuinely and practically “our diversity”. This diversity needs to be protected, and promoted. We need to feel safe in our own culture, and to know more about the cultures of others. We need to bridge the *digital* divide and we need to bridge the *cultural* divide. In this day and age, the two are inseparable. For in the last analysis, the answer must be dialogue and dialogue again: dialogue on equal terms, for sure, but dialogue always.

Thank you.