

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,  
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by  
Mr Koichiro Matsuura

Director-General  
of the United Nations Educational,  
Scientific and Cultural Organization  
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the  
International Conference on Dialogue among Civilizations  
at the United Nations University

Tokyo, 31 July 2001

Your Excellencies,  
Distinguished representatives,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to welcome you to this International Conference on Dialogue among Civilizations, which will be a significant event in the celebration of the International Year and a landmark in the cooperation between UNESCO and United Nations University. It is my pleasant task to salute all distinguished participants in this important event.

Let me also express my gratitude to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO, Asahi Shimbun, and the Japan Foundation, for their unflinching and generous support for and sponsorship of this event.

My most profound personal thanks go to you, Rector Hans van Ginkel, for the exemplary and effective collaboration between the United Nations University and UNESCO, which has enabled us to organize this Conference in a true spirit of shared visions and aspirations – I may even say a spirit of real dialogue and cooperation.

Last, but far from least, I wish to thank the many distinguished participants and learned scholars and experts, who have traveled from many distant places to my country, Japan, to share with us their thoughts, reflections and insights on the dialogue among civilizations. I am convinced that your contributions will enlighten and enrich us all and will make a most valuable contribution to the international efforts and future orientations related to this Year. I extend to you all my warmest welcome.

On 5 September 2000, on the eve of the historic UN Millennium Summit in New York, UNESCO took the initiative to launch the United Nations Year for Dialogue among Civilizations with a Round Table in the United Nations Headquarters. Leaders from all continents shared their views, experience and visions for a world peace, built on tolerance, dialogue and mutual understanding. Their political perspectives were complemented by contributions from literary world, the media, academia, diplomacy and the International Organizations.

The launch was a unique opportunity for political and intellectual interaction. It emphasized the importance of dialogue, not only as a cultural phenomenon but also as a tool for conflict-resolution and reconciliation in a globalized world where peace remains fragile and tenuous, and where new

forms of intolerance and aggression are emerging. Many of the problems faced by today's world have arisen due to conflicts *within* nations, and several Round Table participants concluded that dialogue must begin at home.

The launch provided top-level evidence of the fact that democratic societies, buoyed by dialogue, provide stability and peaceful co-existence. Dialogue also entails the absence of poverty and marginalization so that people are empowered to become genuine participants and actors in their own development process. The community of nations must strive to address better and more equitably the multiple challenges of globalization. It must be our mission, indeed our vocation, to work for a globalization with a human face.

Since the successful launch of the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations in New York in September 2000, I have always felt – intuitively and intellectually – that the celebration of the Year would mark a real moment in the contemporary international atmosphere, reflecting a renewed and reinforced commitment to dialogue among cultures, civilizations, groups, communities, countries and individuals. I must admit, however, that I was unable to foresee the overwhelming response to, and success of, this unique initiative. The political will to explore the potentiality of dialogue, especially in this era of globalization, to give it new impetus and meaning, and to chart new avenues and approaches, is remarkable.

During the Year, I have personally addressed a series of important conferences, seminars and meetings, organized under the umbrella of “the Dialogue among Civilizations”: the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, the UNEP Governing Council in Nairobi in Kenya, and the International Colloquium on the Indus Valley Civilization in Islamabad. UNESCO was also present at the Tehran Conference and at the International Conference on Dialogue among Civilizations in Lithuania last April. A few weeks ago I had the pleasure of addressing the International Colloquium on the Dialogue among Civilizations, convened by ISESCO in Rabat, Morocco.

We are now looking forward to the forthcoming Summit of the Francophonie in Beirut in October 2001 and, indeed, to the important debates of the UN General Assembly on 3 and 4 December in New York. UNESCO's celebration of the UN Year will culminate in an international conference in Paris, organized together with the French *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, which will bring together eminent historians and intellectuals from various continents to discuss the theme of “Civilizations in the Eye of the Other”.

These important events – and many others – emphasize the broad and multi-faceted scope of the dialogue among civilizations. We are living in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. “The other” is surprisingly close. Difference is encountered in the adjoining neighbourhood, the familiar turns up in the farthest corners of the world. At the same time, however, the globalization process constantly engenders hitherto unknown universes, new territories, and hence new uncertainties and fears. Difference is often used as an excuse for intolerance, hatred and the annihilation of others.

The UN Year of Dialogue among Civilizations appropriately emphasizes in its motto that “diversity is not a threat”. Indeed, in a framework of political equality, human rights and responsibility for “the other”, difference offers the opportunity to explore new horizons and to enrich our lives. The capacity of human beings to feel empathy and compassion for others goes deeper than the mere coexistence of different ethno-cultural groups. Such feelings touch the most profound spiritual nature of human beings and should be given overt recognition in social and political discourse relating to global society. Dialogue is the key because dialogue alone can lead to long-term understanding, reconciliation and peace. In many respects, it is an invitation to re-think the idea of humanity.

I have called upon UNESCO’s staff, at Headquarters and in the field, to give full support and assistance to this collective effort, and I am committed to participate personally in as many meetings and events as possible. UNESCO will be one of the few International Organizations which will actively pursue the dialogue among cultures and civilizations well beyond the official year 2001.

Today, a little more than half-way through the Year, we can afford to dig deeper into the historical perspectives, the inter-cultural dimensions, and indeed the political aspects of the dialogue among civilizations, in an attempt to better grasp its inherent challenges and opportunities for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. I look forward to benefiting from the deliberations here in Tokyo and Kyoto as a contribution to generating a new, inclusive framework for dialogue – a framework that corresponds to the ethical demands of the modern world.

This Conference will thus be a decisive building-block in the common effort worldwide, and I am convinced that the outcome of our joint effort will enable us to articulate dynamic, constructive and forward-looking conclusions, which may assist the Members of the UN when they debate the subject of the Dialogue among Civilizations in December 2001, at the level of the UN General Assembly.

Once again, let me welcome you all to Japan. I look forward to a fruitful and stimulating conference.