

**Conférence générale**

31^e session
Document d'information

Генеральная конференция

31-я сессия
Информационный документ

inf

Paris 2001

General Conference

31st session
Information document

المؤتمر العام

الدورة الحادية والثلاثون
وثيقة إعلامية

Conferencia General

31^a reunión
Documento de información

大会

第三十一届会议
资料性文件

31 C/INF.11
17 October 2001
Original: French

Address by
H.E. Mr Jacques Chirac
President of the French Republic

at the 31st session of the General Conference of UNESCO

Paris, 15 October 2001

Mr President of the Republic of Nigeria,
Madam and Dear Colleagues,
Madam President of the General Conference,
Madam Chairperson of the Executive Board,
Mr Director-General of UNESCO,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Has the world learnt all the lessons of the twentieth century? Such is the question on many lips today. The tragedy that took place on 11 September struck at the very heart of the Utopian vision of this new millennium as a time of peace and the end of history. It put paid to the feeling that we had left behind us the century of two world wars, in which millions died – the century of the Shoah, the Gulag and so many other massacres. Even though there were still conflicts and bloodshed on the planet, the new century was nonetheless welcomed with a sense of hope and faith. Hope for a world that was, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, free and at peace; a better world, where progress in science, the virtues of education and speed of communication would bring greater prosperity, justice and happiness. Faith in the progress of democracy and affirmation of solidarities.

That hope and that faith have been shaken by the tragedy of New York, whose consequences we have yet to gauge. We are hearing more and more talk of a clash of civilizations that will be the hallmark of the twenty-first century, just as the nineteenth century was marked by the clash of nationalities and the twentieth by that of ideologies. A clash of civilizations that – now and in times to come – may be more far-reaching, more violent and more impassioned because of a confrontation of cultures and religions.

This line of thinking, which thrives on all manner of fear, must be rejected outright. For accepting it would mean falling into the trap that we have been set by terrorists bent on stirring up conflict among human beings, setting culture against culture and religion against religion. And if, confronting the horror, countries unite to punish the guilty and to put a stop to terrorism, this is a battle for humankind, for humanity and against barbarism.

Above all, we must counter such thinking with another political, moral and cultural reality, another goal: to foster respect, exchange and dialogue among all cultures. This is inseparable from the clear and uncompromising affirmation of the values that make us what we are.

Your General Conference, which comes at a time of doubt and questioning, offers an opportunity to reopen certain questions, to come up with answers, to express ideals. I am happy to be speaking here on behalf of France.

We must each of us, without succumbing to any temptation to lose our heads, examine our respective roles. And when we do, a host of questions arise. Have we remained faithful to our own cultures and their underlying values? Has the West given the impression of being a domineering, essentially materialistic culture, regarded as aggressive because most of humanity observes and lives side by side with it without ever being able to gain access to it? Have our great cultural debates not appeared, at times, to be the talk of privileged and ethnocentric people who spurn the social and

spiritual realities of non-Westerners? How far can a civilization go in its efforts to export its values? The answer to that – we experience it in our traditions and feel it in our hearts and minds – is that intercultural dialogue, at a time when the destiny of different peoples is more intertwined than ever, is the key to peace. We need a dialogue that is revitalized, renewed, reinvented and attuned to the real world.

Upon what principles should that dialogue be built? The first, which could be part of UNESCO's title, is that all cultures are equal in terms of dignity, and that they must strive to understand one another in depth and enrich one another. This is entirely self-evident, a fact borne out by the whole history of humanity – literary, artistic and architectural. It also – and above all – provides a means of interpreting the world.

Where would architecture, poetry or mathematics be without Arabic culture, which, while embracing ancient knowledge, was venturing far beyond its borders at a time when Europe had shut itself off from the outside world? What would have become of philosophy if it had not been for the Hindu fascination with the nature of being, its sense of rhythm and the breathing wholeness of life? What would have become of twentieth-century art were it not for the fertile influence of Africa and the Earth's first inhabitants? What about the Far East and its passionate quest for harmony and right action, its intuitive understanding of the tension of opposites as a source of vital momentum? What would have become of the dream of freedom and the respect due to every man, woman and child without the philosophy of the Enlightenment that spread from eighteenth-century France across the whole of Europe and, ultimately, across the oceans? What more needs to be said about the crucial contribution that religions have made to the lives of human beings by raising them from a state of mere existence to a quest for the absolute – religions that distance people from hatred and selfishness and bring them together in an open and caring community?

Not all cultures may develop at the same pace. They peak and decline, experiencing periods of influence and expansion, followed by silence and withdrawal. But they continue to live in the present in our collective memory. They build our identities, our *raison d'être*. They bring light and pleasure into our lives, they give us the charm of poetry and art, and they build bridges to knowledge and transcendence. They also grapple with the obscure and question the mysterious and enigmatic. Together, and in equal measure, they satisfy humanity's need for enlightenment, progress and ethics.

The second of these principles, which is inseparable from the equal dignity of cultures, is the need for cultural diversity. There can be no dialogue between two almost identical entities while scant regard is shown for the Other. Yet, this diversity is under threat. I am thinking of the various languages of the world, which today number approximately 5,000. We know that one half of these are likely to disappear in the course of this century if nothing is done to safeguard them. I am thinking of indigenous peoples, these isolated minorities with their fragile cultures, often annihilated when they come into contact with our modern civilizations. I am also thinking of the human habitat, ways of life, customs, crafts and cultural artefacts, which are all under pressure from standardization, one of the spin-offs of globalization.

Make no mistake. I am not one of those who glorify the past and see globalization as the source of all evil. There was no admirable respect for cultures yesterday; nor is there today an uncontrollable desire for hegemony. Let us just remember the conquests and colonial campaigns which all too often sought to impose forcibly, by means of arms and other kinds of pressure – and incidentally with a clear conscience – beliefs and systems of thought quite alien to the peoples being colonized.

Today, globalization is often presented as a new form of colonization aimed at ushering in everywhere an identical relationship, or even an identical absence of relationship, to history, to humankind and to the gods.

The reality is more complex, if indeed globalization can be qualified as “good” or “bad”, given that that ascribes to globalization a moral dimension, intentions and projects, whereas in reality it only has objects. It is nevertheless true that there are good and bad uses of globalization. Good if what is shared, what circulates freely, what shapes people’s conscience is information, knowledge, progress, understanding of the Other, and the sharing of those values and riches. But bad if globalization is synonymous with uniformization, a standard formatting, a reduction to the lowest common denominator, or the primacy of the law of the market alone, and is forgetful of that humanist culture whose very essence is to rally people around ethical principles.

The response to globalization as a steamroller of cultures is cultural diversity. A diversity founded on the conviction that each people has a unique message for the world, that each people may enrich humanity by contributing its share of beauty and truth.

UNESCO takes pride in the drafting of a universal declaration, the first step towards a convention which may enshrine in law the special nature of the cultural factor. France, which has long been committed to this fight, calls for the rapid adoption of this text, which may be seen as a helping hand extended to all those who wish to defend their identity. Rather than treating intellectual works as mere marketable goods, the declaration will affirm that it is legitimate to protect them, to support them, to foster the expression of creative artists, and to promote the broadest possible public access to their works.

However, above and beyond such texts and commitments, the defence of cultural diversity must take the form of tangible programmes. Programmes of support for cultural projects involving the creation of open spaces for the presentation of works, performances and artistic creations which reflect and indeed invent the soul of peoples. Programmes focused on the new technologies, which hold out both great promise and great frustration. Thanks to these technologies, individuals now have access as never before to the polyphony of the cultures of the world, and may now make their voices heard. Provided they have the means. Provided that the Web and satellites are not in practice a monopoly of the Western world, and within that world of a single language. I hope that UNESCO will tackle the threat of the digital gap.

How can we enable and bring about this dialogue? The most urgent thing, since nothing is more inimical to dialogue than a sense of injustice, is to ensure greater justice, greater solidarity, and to pay greater attention to human beings and their problems in the grand scheme of the world.

While I have mentioned these varied and contradictory aspects of globalization, it is certainly true that globalization is giving rise to considerable concern. Many peoples fear being left by the wayside in this great global movement, and many are afraid of losing their soul and control of their destiny, as shown by the demonstrations that now accompany international meetings.

These fears do not spring from a void. They are a sure sign that a new world is coming into being, with the surge in the volume of trade drastically altering the very notion of countries and borders. The economy is now king, and there has been a consequent increase in both wealth and inequalities. So great has the pressure on natural resources become that nature is no longer able to replenish its own reserves. We have a cultural revolution rooted in the new information society. Developments in biotechnology are giving us access to the secrets of life. Given these prospects, some encouraging, others troubling, strong responses are to be expected. While we all agree that our response must not be a squeamish withdrawal into our own shell, we also understand that there can

be no question of letting the world be ruled by market forces alone. The duty of politicians and decision-makers is thus to civilize globalization and ensure that the interest of the individual, of all human beings, prevails.

Hence the importance of not allowing a legal vacuum and concomitant abuses to arise. I am thinking of the Internet, that extraordinary instrument for mutual knowledge and dialogue. It needs ethical norms just as much as technical regulations. No universal forum is today prepared to reflect on the freedom of expression and the limits thereto, on how to strike a balance between the right to disseminate works and the need to respect their authors, on protection of privacy and, above all, protection of children. It would clearly be in line with its vocation that UNESCO should provide that forum for reflection.

I am also thinking of advances in science. In the face of the threat of reproductive human cloning and the growing debate on euthanasia, with the burning question of medical experiments in the countries of the South, and as a fresh debate on the ownership of genetic resources gets under way, it is to the United Nations that the international community must turn. It is in this connection that I have called for work to begin on the drafting of a world convention on bioethics, and for the establishment under the United Nations Secretary-General of a world ethics committee. In view of its experience in this field, UNESCO must remain at the centre of these efforts.

Ensuring that the interest of human beings prevails also (and above all) entails seriously grappling with certain increasingly unacceptable divides. The divide between North and South: today more than one third of humanity lives in poverty, a poverty which can only worsen if the rich countries continue to fail to assume their responsibilities with regard to development assistance. Such assistance needs to be carefully monitored to ensure that it is not diverted from its true objectives; it must be geared to local conditions and expectations, and to the identities of the men and women who receive it.

The education divide, which was so eloquently described just now by the President of Nigeria, and which is one of the great priorities of UNESCO. We are bound to recognize that in this field, which is so crucial for the progress and emancipation of peoples, much remains to be done. Literacy is progressing all too slowly. In some countries it is even regressing as a result of conflicts, economic distress and AIDS. The brain drain from the countries of the South to the industrialized countries continues to grow. In whole regions, girls are forbidden to go to school, a denial of the most elementary right, the right to learn, and a disaster for development. In the Afghan drama, the conditions imposed on women, who are forced to stay indoors and deprived of all rights, in particular of any access to knowledge, are at the heart of the problem. These conditions underscore the obscurantism of the Taliban, at the same time as they ensure their hold over the people: for educating women means enabling the society as a whole to free itself and to progress.

We need therefore to mobilize our efforts so as to combat poverty and promote education in the world, the kind of education that will enable us to understand others. This must be done in the name of solidarity, in the name of justice, but also in the name of reason. While it is false and dangerous to make a direct connection between terrorism and poverty, it is clear to everyone that there is a link between terrorism and fanaticism, a fanaticism which flourishes in the fertile soil of ignorance, humiliation and frustration. At a time when the communication media are making the planet smaller, at a time when images, broadcast throughout the world, enable us to see everything, without always enabling us to understand, and so creating anger, rejection or envy, we need to show profound awareness and to take wide-ranging action. The introduction of greater justice and fairness into the process of globalization will facilitate the dialogue between peoples and help prepare our common future.

However, the dialogue of peoples and cultures involves other demands, other ambitions and other acts of generosity. It supposes respect for others, together with a lucid understanding of and respect for oneself. If we are to respect others we must first get to know them, so that we do not see them as totally different beings with whom we cannot possibly identify, since that attitude is the basic characteristic of all totalitarian acts. In this mutual discovery, the new communication media, which enable us to watch and witness others and also bring us into direct contact with them, are called upon to play a major role, as are all forms of exchange, particularly at the university level. To respect others means listening to them, working with them and not deciding for them. As long ago as 1952, in this same forum, Claude Lévi-Strauss expressed in masterly terms the necessity for collaboration between cultures and civilizations.

This means, in the final analysis, involving all nations in the decisions concerning the management of the global commons. It means coordination and consultation with the international civil society that is now beginning to emerge. It means consolidating these groupings of countries that form natural coalitions, regional unions or even linguistic unions that transcend frontiers, such as the International Organization of the Francophonie, born from a shared language. It is on this basis that a truly multi-polar world may be constructed, involving the emergence of new interlocutors, the representatives of peoples and cultures that will be able to take their place in a balanced dialogue that respects the views of all.

To respect others means not to regard them as others, which is both the most obvious and the most difficult thing to do. We live in open and multifaceted societies, where others are our neighbours and our doubles, in whom we sometimes see differences and sometimes resemblances. With these others, we need to invent rules for living together. No ready-made answer will do. This is an immense challenge confronting all our societies. It requires open-mindedness, trust, imagination but also responsibility, strength of mind and firmness, in order to resist anything that may jeopardize freedom and the rights of the individual. It requires love and an awareness of our duties towards others. So that all convictions, all opinions and all religions may coexist. So that the cohesion in our societies is never threatened, so that the values of freedom and tolerance without which communal life would become impossible are respected and shared.

A lucid understanding of oneself. The dialogue of cultures must be conducted with clear-sightedness and humility, since its worst enemy is arrogance. Each civilization and each people can and must be proud of what it has accomplished and given to the world. Each must also be aware of the shadows in their past. What are we to say of the crimes of which civilizations are capable and of which no civilization in history is completely innocent? All civilizations, at one time or another in their history, have given way to intolerance, contempt and hatred. All, at some time in their history, have sought to belittle or even deny the humanity of others.

That is why each culture and each religion needs to undertake a critical self-examination. Both the courage to examine the past and acts of repentance are steps forward along this path; they constitute the duty of all civilizations, all societies and all religions. In this essential task of self-examination much remains to be done. No more than a few days before the attacks in Manhattan, the Durban conference showed that this task of lucid self-examination was still faltering and that it was sometimes rejected so as to be able to point the finger of blame at someone else. Escaping from the need to find a scapegoat is one of the conditions of the dialogue of cultures.

Lastly, respect for oneself. Love of oneself is a prerequisite for speaking with others. Feeling sure of one's own values and one's own ideals is a prerequisite for a rich and constructive dialogue. Let us seek to ensure that our developed societies are capable of offering more than just material goods. Let us seek to ensure that they do not give the idea that everything is the same, that

everything is equal to everything else and that nothing is worth the trouble of being defended. Thus, in France, let us not fear to state resolutely what we are: a people imbued with liberty, fraternity and equality. A secular people, but one respectful of religions and marked by its religious history. A people bearing a message, a message based on a certain idea of women and of men, of their rights, their dignity and their freedom. A message based on the defence of the model and principles of democracy.

Let us not be afraid to affirm the existence of a universal ethic, the ethic that inspired the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Contrary to the assertions of the enemies of freedom and fanatics of whatever origins, this ethic is not a western model offered as a Trojan horse by civilizations held in contempt. It is common to all humanity. It belongs to all peoples, all nations, and all religions, for no religion has been established on the basis of the destruction of people or a refusal to recognize their individuality and to let them reach the good and the beautiful. More than ever, we must defend it, energize it and accept its universal value. To affirm this universality is to emphasize the solidarity that unites all human beings. It is to proclaim that each woman, each man and each child has imprescriptible rights. It is to seek in each civilization the expression of a common ideal. It is to recognize that truth may be expressed in an infinite number of languages. There is no contradiction between a universal ethic and the diversity of cultures, since respect for cultures is part of this humanism that we are calling for. Such are the values on which we cannot compromise. Dialogue is not a renunciation of one's self but an explanation of one's self, an offering of one's self to others. It is by such means that mutual enrichment is achieved.

Ladies and Gentlemen, somewhere in east Africa several million years ago, our common ancestor arose and decided to set out on the conquest of the unknown. Through trial and error, peoples and cultures were born. The same adventure has been played out in the four corners of the world: the invention of an identity and the recognition of selected values. Often, each group has believed itself to be the sole custodian of the ultimate experience of humanity. And yet there have always been people able to cross from one group to another, to listen to one another and organize the encounter of values and ideas.

In the beginning humanity was one; now it is both one and many, rich in the cultures of the five continents, obliged to invent the rules for coexistence and harmony. I am confident, because humanity bears within itself the capacity to face up to the great challenges of its history. In the not-so-distant past, against the forces of hatred, rejection, and incomprehension there rose the voice of humanism, the power of democracy. So that this voice may triumph once again, let us learn to understand one another, let us learn to speak to one another, let us learn to work together, with respect, lucidity and pride in what we are. Such is the meaning, such is the challenge of the dialogue of cultures, of the sharing of cultures. That is your mission. Our mission. Thank you very much.