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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
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联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the Third World Congress of Imams and Rabbis
for Peace “The Sacredness of Peace”**

UNESCO, 15 December 2008

· Mr President of the Republic of Senegal,
· Mrs Wade,
· Mr Director-General of the Hommes de Parole Foundation,
Distinguished Religious Dignitaries,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am most honoured to welcome you today to the Organization's Headquarters on the occasion of the Third World Congress of Imams and Rabbis for Peace.

The need for a universal dialogue between cultures and religions is more relevant than ever, and is today one of the priorities of the international community, as well as of the entire United Nations system.

I should like to thank most sincerely President Abdoulaye Wade for being with us today. You are a man of peace and dialogue, and as the President of Senegal and of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, you spread an exemplary message of political and religious tolerance in Africa and beyond.

I should add that tomorrow in Oslo, you will be participating in the opening of the meeting of the High-Level Group on Education for All. You already hosted this meeting of major international EFA partners in Dakar last year. Your consistency in promoting the ideals of education for all, notably through your “Case des Tout-Petits” programme is a true message of hope and encouragement.

I should also like to thank the Hommes de Parole Foundation, and especially its Director-General, Mr Alain Michel, for having ambitiously implemented this wonderful initiative.

Finally, I would like to welcome the religious dignitaries and many experts who responded with generosity to this call from imams and rabbis for peace.

A dialogue between men of goodwill, notably to discuss the prospect of peace in the Middle East, is today essential. After Brussels and Seville, we are then very grateful to you for having chosen UNESCO to continue these exchanges.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As the preamble of the Constitution of UNESCO highlights, peace is not a certainty, but is constructed day after day in the minds of men.

I quote: "the wide diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace are indispensable to the dignity of man and constitute a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfil in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern".

Sixty years later, this message remains intact. An organization like ours, devoted to the expansion of international cooperation in education, culture, science and communication, is today fully committed to bringing this culture of peace to life.

Interreligious dialogue, as an integral part of intercultural dialogue, must take its rightful place here.

I know that your congress would like to place particular emphasis on a subject that concerns us all: peace in the Middle East and the revival of Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. I am pleased to note that your workshops will deal with this concern notably by focusing on three crucial issues: education, dialogue and the media.

Please know that you will find a very receptive forum here for this approach.

As regards the Middle East, in our fields of competence we are also fully committed to supporting all the initiatives leading to better understanding, dialogue and cooperation. We can therefore only praise the involvement of eminent religious personalities in this process.

We are also well aware that this initiative in favour of interfaith dialogue goes beyond the Middle East – it is a widely shared concern today.

It especially echoes the recent, impressive initiative for dialogue between Islam and other religions launched by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in Madrid in July 2008 at the World Conference on Dialogue.

It also joins some of the main work themes of the Alliance of Civilizations, created in 2005 on the initiative of the Spanish and Turkish authorities and placed under the

auspices of the United Nations in order to promote intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

Specifically, UNESCO signed an important Memorandum of Understanding in January 2008 with the Alliance of Civilizations to implement concrete projects. These concern, for example, the development of educational, cultural and scientific content; the increasing of exchanges between young people; the promotion of communication methods to fight stereotypes and prejudices; and the establishment of new multi-partnerships.

To ensure the advancement of this dialogue, UNESCO has concluded many cooperation agreements with organizations such as the African Union, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Arab League Educational Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), the Council of Europe and the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures.

These partnerships are necessary because we cannot succeed alone. We must pool our know-how and expertise to mobilize resources, spread our messages and give visibility to our action.

UNESCO, for its part, is fully committed to this objective and is working closely with all of these organizations, while developing a valuable and effective network of UNESCO Chairs for interreligious dialogue for intercultural understanding in universities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Intercultural and interfaith dialogue has implications which vary depending on the country and the context.

There are three major objectives that I believe are particularly important for your discussions: developing methodologies, procedures and networks fostering dialogue between different players in the cultural and religious fields; strengthening dialogue and mutual understanding through activities carried out at the country level in education, culture, science and communication and, finally, integrating the issue of intercultural dialogue, including in its religious dimension, as an essential component of quality education in school curricula.

At a time when societies are increasingly learning to live in multicultural and multi-denominational environments, the issue of learning intercultural competence and teaching cultural diversity is in fact becoming essential.

This is coupled with another necessity: opening up to the plurality of memories and cultures, and giving major importance to the circulation of knowledge.

In essence, we must build a common future based on shared memories. Religions have their place here, because they also spread a message of peace, justice and human solidarity. Dialogue between individuals and groups belonging to different religions or spiritual traditions is thus more than necessary today.

Our Organization certainly cannot take the place of cultural or religious figures, but we can support them in their call for tolerance and solidarity.

This goal, notably in the Middle East, demands constant learning and listening to the Other. In this endeavour, one must also know how to recognize pauses and dead ends. I know that you are ready to begin this dialogue in an open and pluralistic way.

This is why the chosen theme of your congress "The Sacredness of Peace", is particularly inspiring. In the three religions of the Book, as well as other spiritual traditions, Peace is in fact a sacred accomplishment that reflects a profound obligation of dignity and brotherhood.

Please know that this obligation is also ours. It is with this conviction that I welcome you once again and wish you a very fruitful meeting.

Thank you for your attention.