

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
Mr Koïchiro Matsuura

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

at the International Conference on the
Dialogue of Civilizations

Special session on
"Political Aspects of the Dialogue of Civilizations"

Kyoto, Japan, 3 August 2001

Mr Personal Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations,
Mr Secretary-General of the International Organization of the Francophonie,
Madam Executive Secretary of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries,
Mr Director-General of ALECSO,
Mr Director-General of ISESCO,
Mr Rector of the United Nations University,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and an honour for me to chair this Special Session of the Conference devoted to “Political Aspects of the Dialogue of Civilizations”.

The topic that brings us together today is an unusual one: we are hardly in the habit of associating civilizations and politics. But while it is unusual, it is nonetheless profoundly necessary. It reminds us that the dialogue of civilizations not only concerns the intellectual and cultural sphere but also has a profoundly political dimension, in the noblest sense of the term – that is to say, it promotes living together, not only within communities and States but also at the subregional, regional and world levels.

The dialogue of civilizations, indeed, calls for strong political will, at the highest level, in all regions and cultural areas of the world. This will, which in certain parts of the world can involve a measure of courage, is essential to the success of this dialogue. Those of us who attended the Round Table organized, on the initiative of the Islamic Republic of Iran, to mark the launching of this International Year witnessed this at first hand.

I am therefore particularly gratified that the heads of organizations representing extensive geographical and cultural areas should have accepted our invitation, thereby enabling us to benefit from the accumulated wisdom of the African, French-speaking, Portuguese-speaking, Arab and Islamic communities.

Before giving them the floor, allow me however to underline what seems to me to be one of the most fundamental dimensions of the dialogue of civilizations, and one with major political implications: I refer to ethics.

The dialogue of civilizations restores to the centre of our concerns the fundamental **ethical** intuition at the heart of the United Nations system, according to which peace is our most precious common possession. The necessity for the dialogue of civilizations rests on this requirement, which is nothing less than the awareness of the impossibility of people and cultures existing in isolation. Without dialogue, cultures and civilizations decline and are condemned to disappear. This was the truth enunciated with remarkable lucidity in the aftermath of the First World War by the great French intellectual Paul Valéry when he said: “We civilizations now know that we are mortal”. This warning, which was addressed above all to the European civilizations, could be directed with even greater relevance today to all cultures and all civilizations: at a time of accelerating globalization and increased interdependence, civilizations and cultures have a vital need of contact, innovation, interaction, exchange and dialogue, founded on equality of dignity and thus on tolerance.

But let us not deceive ourselves. This dialogue of civilizations entails responsibilities and the observance of certain rules, not only at the interpersonal level but also in the public domain and political life. It must be based on the voluntary commitment of individuals and societies to respect, reciprocally and in their common interest, a set of essential principles and rights. It is consequently a fundamentally democratic and pluralist process that presupposes a respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The dialogue of civilizations requires that we reconcile, in the new realm created by globalization, the universality of rights and the diversity of the human condition.

Nor can we forget that the dialogue *among* cultures and civilizations can and should be established *within* societies themselves, which are increasingly composite and diversified. It therefore calls for the participation of all, particularly women and young people, and of all the active forces of civil society. It is also a political act, whose significance is not always understood in all countries. As was stressed by the heads of State and intellectuals assembled for the launching of the Year at United Nations Headquarters on 5 December last year, at the invitation of UNESCO and the Islamic Republic of Iran, “dialogue begins at home” – in each community, each State, each subregion, each continent, and between men and women

All continents of the world – from Africa to Europe and including Asia and the Middle East – are affected by frequently savage conflicts, which are fuelled by the mutual intolerance and ignorance of cultures and communities, by discrimination in all its forms, by xenophobia and by racism. In a word, by the absence or failure of dialogue and consultation.

Promoting the dialogue of civilizations seems to me in these circumstances very relevant to the promotion of peace, not only globally but also regionally and subregionally. I am convinced that it is an indispensable condition for the genuine resolution of conflicts and the establishment of lasting peace between peoples and communities divided by misunderstandings, animosities or even deep hatreds. Based on a willingness to listen to others’ views, on understanding and mutual respect, such a dialogue becomes a profoundly political act.

I am personally convinced – and I have made a point of repeating it throughout this International Year – that learning to know the cultures of other people, and listening to what they have to say, is a way of dispelling hatred, ignorance and mutual distrust and helps to build peace. We should therefore learn what each culture owes to other cultures. We should at the same time recognize that civilizations are not immutable, that they continuously change and redefine themselves according to circumstances and new interactions.

This is an undertaking that can only yield full and lasting results in the long term, through a long and patient effort of accommodation and reconciliation. Whether it concerns the domestic politics of States or international politics, it is an action that we should pursue with determination – and our meeting today, I believe, shows that it is one to which we all wish to commit ourselves.

This is not, however, self-evidently the case. Historically, the term “civilization” is charged with stereotypes and false notions: the supposed “civilization” of some has often been contrasted with the supposed “barbarism” of others. It has often led to a ranking of civilizations and an antagonism between “dominant” and “dominated” civilizations, which have throughout history been the source of numerous conflicts and bloody wars. The term has in particular served as the ideological justification for colonization and policies of forced assimilation equivalent, in this sense, to a rejection of the civilization of others, of the intrinsic dignity of the human person, and of the very notion of dialogue. We must combat this archaic vision of civilizations, which may be seen as synonymous with exclusion, whereas

civilization requires what Jacques Delors, in his report to UNESCO on education in the twenty-first century, has called “learning to live together”.

Ethical considerations should therefore govern our approach. They should extend beyond culture into the realm of science and technology. UNESCO intends to give strong impetus to action in this crucial domain, which remains poorly understood.

UNESCO is also convinced that the dialogue between civilizations likewise requires the recognition and promotion of expressions of cultural diversity. In a world of growing interdependence, and in the era of globalization, we must seek to ensure that one culture does not tend to dominate the others. The promotion of cultural diversity (what the report of the Commission chaired by Javier Pérez de Cuéllar calls our “creative diversity”), especially on behalf of the least represented cultures and with particular regard to the exchange of cultural goods and services, constitutes a profoundly political act, at the national, regional and global levels. Globalization should allow the free expression of such diversity, which represents a precious component of our common human heritage.

As you know, UNESCO is currently preparing a Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which should provide the necessary basis for such a reconciliation and should help to promote the cultural heritage in all parts of the world, particularly within the developing countries.

UNESCO’s action for the preservation of the world heritage, through the 1970 Convention, is now very widely known and appreciated. Preserving the heritage obviously means preserving its diversity; it means giving each of us the chance to go in search of others, through the monuments they have constructed, the landscapes they have shaped, and the material traces they have left behind them. It means fostering a dialogue between civilizations. But the languages, oral literature, music, dance, games, mythologies, rituals, customs, craft skills and architecture, as well as the traditional forms of communication, are also splendid testimonies to the diversity of cultures and are equally deserving of our attention. It is with the aim of expanding the instrument in existence now for over 30 years that UNESCO has this year made an initial proclamation of 19 masterpieces of the intangible heritage of humanity, so as to bestow special recognition on the most remarkable examples of cultural spaces or forms of popular or traditional expression. And we are working on a standard-setting instrument that, after the example of the World Heritage Convention, should make it possible to promote, with the help of the countries and communities concerned, expressions of the cultural heritage that have for too long been neglected. These acts demand courage, and above all political courage, because they place diversity and the dialogue of cultures at the centre of history and of the evolution of any society.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Education is the essential tool that will enable us to develop the long-term dialogue between cultures and civilizations and to ensure the participation of all, men and women, in this dialogue. I say “long-term”, because the timescale of globalization and of the new technologies is too often that of urgency and immediacy, of the short term, which limits the capacity of human beings to shape their destiny. Yet it is over long periods that peoples construct the values that give meaning to their lives, structure their relationships and give form and substance to their identity. We need to restore the priority given to the timescales of education and culture, artistic expression, creativity and dialogue, the timescale of language learning, without which neither education nor dialogue have any meaning. Education – I mean high-quality education for all, in particular that of girls and women – also constitutes, in a world in which some 135 million children do not attend school and almost 900 million adults are illiterate, an essential political commitment. The requirements of such a

commitment are fully reflected in the objectives set at the Dakar Summit last year, whose follow-up UNESCO is responsible for coordinating.

We should also recognize that history is not only a major drama, but also a key instrument for understanding, examining and promoting the interactions between peoples and cultures. Through the preparation of regional and general histories and through the launching of major projects of intercultural dialogue – the Silk Roads, the Routes of al-Andalus, the Slave Route, the Routes of Faith – UNESCO has highlighted the historical and contemporary processes that foster a positive understanding between cultures, through the discovery of a common heritage and shared values. These projects have helped to increase our understanding of the sources of collective memory, which can fuel prejudice and incomprehension just as they can contribute to renewal of the dialogue among civilizations, cultures, religions and spiritual traditions.

A careful examination of the major conflicts, both ancient and modern, between geographically separated peoples but above all between neighbouring peoples, reveals that the antagonisms, mistrust, incomprehension and hatred have been shaped or have been fuelled and sustained by the way each people writes its own history and that of others and by the way it teaches this history and makes it a central part of its heritage and its identity. History is thus one of the essential keys to the promotion of dialogue and reconciliation between civilizations and cultures.

This is why it is necessary to promote an awareness of the urgent need for an ethical approach to history. What is required above all is that every people, while enjoying its legitimate right to compose its own history, should be fully aware of the way it is thereby shaping its memory, its identity and its image and vision of others (neighbours, friends or traditional enemies). It should endeavour to observe the highest standards of scholarly accuracy and be determined to promote an ethic of dialogue, openness and mutual respect.

In the last analysis, history should be the stage on which plural identities and a common heritage are constructed, in keeping with the most positive values of humanity. It is for this reason that UNESCO encourages the renewal of historical research, history teaching and textbooks so as to foster the processes of dialogue, mutual enrichment and convergence between cultures.

Looking beyond history itself, it is education as a whole that needs to be rethought. It should help young people to embrace the complexity of a world in which each object has its place in a nexus of relationships and cannot be envisaged outside this environment with which it maintains such close links. In this vast interconnected whole, there are no isolated phenomena, and a relationship exists – according to the paradoxical image familiar to us all – between the fluttering of a butterfly's wings and the unleashing of a storm. This idea of universal "reliance", to borrow an expression from the philosopher Edgar Morin, invites us to conceive of the totality of phenomena in a global context and to always remain aware that we all belong to a single planet.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The great challenge in the years to come is simple: it is that of "humanizing globalization". We must recognize that the cultural, spiritual and linguistic diversity of humanity, far from constituting an obstacle to dialogue, is a guarantee of its richness. At the same time, we cannot overlook the fact that current imbalances with regard to development are impediments to the creation of international areas of dialogue, where people and cultures can meet on an equal footing. Nor must we neglect the difficult path leading to the

recognition of ethical standards and principles that should in future guide, on the basis of bilateral or multilateral negotiations, the dialogue of cultures and civilizations. The task may seem immense. But it is the only one that can engender peace in the minds of men and intellectual solidarity among nations.

How can we move towards an ethic of dialogue among civilizations? How can we ensure that the contemporary importance of cultural diversity is recognized? What contribution can high-quality education for all make in this context? To discuss these and other key issues we are fortunate and privileged to welcome among us a number of distinguished personalities and heads of regional organizations. I shall name them in the order in which they will speak in our debate:

Ms Vigdis FINNBOGADOTTIR, former President of the Republic of Iceland, is a long-standing friend of UNESCO. She is, in particular, President of COMEST, the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology, as well as UNESCO's Goodwill Ambassador for Languages.

Mr Boutros BOUTROS-GHALI, Secretary-General of the International Organization of the Francophonie and former Secretary-General of the United Nations, who was the author at the United Nations of an "Agenda for Democracy" and an "Agenda for Development", which remain a source of inspiration for many of us. He heads at UNESCO an International Panel on Democracy and Development, whose findings will be published shortly.

Mr Amara ESSY, recently elected Secretary-General of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Côte d'Ivoire and President of the United Nations General Assembly.

Mr Giandomenico PICCO, Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. I wish to thank him for his personal commitment on behalf of this International Year and to tell him that UNESCO has followed with great interest the work of the group of distinguished personalities that he is currently heading on this question.

Mr Abdulaziz Othman ALTWAIJRI, Director-General of the Islamic Organization for Education, Science and Culture (ISESCO).

Ms Dulce Maria PEREIRA, President of the Palmares Cultural Foundation, dedicated to the promotion of African culture in Brazil, and Executive Secretary of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP).

Mr Mongi BOUSNINA, Director-General of the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), former Tunisian Minister of Culture and Permanent Delegate of his country to UNESCO.

I should like to conclude by inviting you to reflect upon an African proverb that illustrates admirably the primacy of core values: "when the branches of the forest trees quarrel, their roots embrace one another".

Thank you.