

*CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*



**ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS**

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at international level*

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Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- Much to my regret I was unable to follow your debates. I apologize for the inconvenience. However, I have been briefed and must say that I am not surprised to learn that your discussions were most interesting and informed.
- In my initial remarks at the opening session, yesterday, I promised you that today I would focus on the universality of human rights and the diversity of cultural contexts. I chose to focus on this topic because, in my view, this is one of the biggest challenges of our time.
- The question you may ask is “why cultural diversity has become a stumbling block to human rights ?” and vice-versa “why universality of human rights seems to act against cultural diversity?”
- Indeed the problem of what universality might mean in a multicultural world haunted the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from the very beginning.
- I will not recall here the impassioned discussions, hearings and consultations held over the two-year process that led to the adoption of the Declaration in 1948.

- But I must reckon that they shed light on current debates and help to remind us both that the Declaration's "Everyone" is not a western bearer of rights and that the Declaration does not mandate a single approved model of human rights for the entire world.
  
- Now my point is twofold: we are we witnessing both a revival of the cultural-imperialism critique and a rise in cultural relativism.
  
- Why that so ?
  
- In my view, because of two main reasons – on the one hand, because we live in increasingly multicultural and multi-ethnic societies. This is a global trend, shaping almost all societies worldwide and putting added strains on contemporary social life. On the other hand, the accelerating pace of globalization has helped to exacerbate vexed questions of identity and turn negotiable disputes into seemingly intractable identity-based conflicts. Why? Because it brings individuals and societies closer together than ever before, interconnecting lives and identities in inextricable ways. But fear of homogenization and of losing identity also creates regressions and tends to bring new tribalism.
  
- As Edward W. Said put it one day, very often people return to comfortable symbols of the past only to affirm an identity that resists against global homogenization, in order to defend themselves against the sense of an all-encompassing global atmosphere.

- Indeed, historical context and legacy are of great importance to shape identity and sense of patriotism, but people's lives cannot be frozen in the past, it must go on.
- It must go on and focus on the future because after all the "sense of identity is a set of currents, flowing currents, rather than a fixed place or a stable set of objects" as again Edward Said and Daniel Barenboim stressed one day when discussing the meaning of homeland and homesickness ....
- Coming both from a complex overlapping of cultures, and because of the hazards of their lives in a time of often forced itinerancy and mobility, the way they defined identity is probably very personal and indeed quite provocative.
- But it helps to make the case for building open and pluralistic identities, free from the burden of possessions, memorabilia and reminiscences from the past which fuels national conflicts and identities as well as xenophobia.

Ladies and Gentlemen

- Allow me to stress three points

- Firstly – The question of identity and humans rights. How do we best protect people ? By granting and recognizing equal rights to all or by denying the rights of some in the name of public order? Can we invoke cultural and religious practices and traditions to prevent individuals from exercising their basic rights or from participating actively in the society ?
  
- It seems to me that respect for human rights is a necessary condition for respect of diversity and protection of minorities.
  
- It is crystal clear that failures to accommodate diversity leads often to an erosion of the rights of minorities and vulnerable people. We have so many examples of this. Think of migrants. Think of refugees. Think of the Roma. Think of the religious minorities – Muslims, Christians and Jewish – in so many countries on earth. Think of all forms of xenophobia and racism.
  
- To a certain extent, the 21<sup>st</sup> century seems to be the age of minorities. This is why identity issues is a major political issue at stake. This is why the challenge of living together in a diverse society could only be met if we can live together as equals in dignity, as the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, published by the Council of Europe rightly points out.

- Let me repeat that, in my view, human rights are a common basis for the integration of diversity. Human rights norms and standards can best provide guidance for managing and protecting diversity.
  
- Developed in a cultural-diverse environment, human rights law not only protect the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all human beings, but it also protects cultural diversity.
  
- Secondly – we need to break the vicious circle that links the Declaration to cultural imperialism and cultural relativism. We need to break the vicious circle between disrespect for human rights and denial of cultural and religious diversity.
  
- These vicious circles have to be turn into a virtuous triangle formed by the States, the individuals and cultural diversity in order to build pluralistic and inclusive societies.

- To build pluralistic and inclusive societies, where the rights of individuals and of minorities are protected, we dramatically need to develop a comprehensive approach of good governance of cultural diversity, as well as new tools and new policies in various fields such as education, youth, media and migration.
  
- As you might know this is the urgent task of the Alliance. It seeks to forge the collective will to address the world's imbalances and address widening rifts between societies.
  
- This effort reflects the will of the vast majority of peoples to reject extremism in any society and support respect for religious and cultural diversity.
  
- Now the question is - how to reconcile respect for different identities with fostering social cohesion ? This is my third point.
  
- Let's face it: this is a very tricky question. We all know that at times, diversity is viewed as a main threat to social cohesion, to the principles of the state or to the values of the majority or even to the interest of a ruling elite.



- But nevertheless, I think most of our States face a big challenge to integrate diversity at large.
  
- What am I speaking about ?
  
- I speak of the huge - ethnic, cultural and religious - diversity of our societies and of the increasing difficulties we experience in living together.
  
- I speak of a widespread malaise that is expressed in increased tensions intra and inter-communities, mutual distrust, in polarized perceptions and world views, in intractable identity-based conflicts, and in the rise of extremism.
  
- Furthermore, I speak of religion being employed as a tool by all and sundry, and used and abused for various purposes and effects.
  
- I speak also of the disorientation of political powers, confronted with the deficiencies of a purely security-based and/or repressive approach, and the absence of suitable policies and instruments for proper governance of cultural diversity.

- All this serves to underline what to me is irrefutable evidence: cultural diversity has become a major political issue challenging modern democracies, pluralism, citizenship and social cohesion as well as peace and stability among nations.
  
- In my view, this is all about fundamental questions concerning values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. This is about democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect for cultural diversity; about justice, social cohesion and inclusive societies; about States, secularization and secularism or *laïcité*; about the public sphere, private acts and religious revival. That's it.
  
- And this applies to all continents, to most countries on earth, to all societies even if to different extents and in various degrees. But we are all confronted with good governance of cultural diversity. Good governance of cultural diversity has become an item in the global agenda for sustainable development.
  
- That is why efforts to address cultural and religious divides are so important. Appropriate and timely policies can prevent social anxieties from mounting as well as fears, which lead to anger, and breed violence.

- The greatest single antidote to violence is dialogue, conversation and debate – speaking our fears, listening to the fears of others, sharing vulnerabilities, building room for constructive dissent and deepening mutual understanding and trust.
  
- This is why intercultural dialogue has to be promoted worldwide at all levels – at global, regional, national and local level. This is why it has to be comprehensive and make appropriate room both for interreligious dialogue (I mean dialogue between religious communities themselves) and for dialogue between public authorities and religious communities.
  
- In my view religious communities should be encouraged to engage in promoting human rights and integration, thus contributing to foster greater consensus, stronger citizenship and social cohesion.
  
- Now last remark - intercultural dialogue is not the answer to all questions nor cure for all problems.

- It goes without saying that political conflicts can only be solved through political negotiations. For example, the long-term resolution of tensions between the so-called Muslim and Western societies cannot be achieved as long as some of the egregious sources of hostility are not successfully addressed. You know what I mean.
  
- But it is equally true that peace agreements rarely hold if they are not strongly backed by the communities involved. Many peace deals in the past have floundered because deep-seated suspicion and hostility remained, dividing people along cultural and religious lines.
  
- In other words, creating the necessary conditions for sustainable peace requires efforts of a different kind, aimed at generating a mind shift among divided communities.
  
- To achieve this goal, the only secure path is: education. Education for human rights. Education for citizenship and respect for others. Education for Intercultural Understanding and Dialogue. Education on Media Literacy. Education about religions and beliefs and both intra- and inter-religious dialogue.
  
- All these are indispensable strategies if we want to make the world a better and safer place to live together as equals in dignity

Many thanks