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# ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

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**Opening Remarks**

**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE**

“Religious Freedom in Democratic Societies “

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Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

Distinguished Guests

- I am very grateful to the Spanish Presidency of the European Union for having proposed that the Alliance of Civilizations co-organize this Conference on the topical issue of “Religious Freedom in Democratic Societies”.
  
- I am only so sorry that because of an unexpected health problem I am not allowed to travel for over a week. Nevertheless, I am happy that modern technology allows me to be present among you via this video message.
  
- So let me just share with you some thoughts on the important issues you will discuss over the next two days.
  
- In my view, this is a very timely debate because western societies today are being challenged by religion in a very pressing and unexpected way.

- According to Geoffrey Brahm Levey, this situation is produced by three intersecting “ fault-lines” (See his book “Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship”):
  - The first is the background context of all discussion of religion in the modern West – i.e. the traditional liberal quest to separate religion and politics for the sake of peace and the mutual protection of both;
  - The second fault-line is more recent and emerged with the rise of identity politics in the United States and beyond in the 1960’s, and the advent of multiculturalism as state policy;
  - The third fault-line has opened up more recently and it is a product of significant Muslim immigration to the West, especially in Europe, and of the nature of “Islam” as a “public religion”.
  
- Looking now at Europe as a whole - and in spite of all differences among countries -, it is crystal clear that greater religious diversity and a growing Muslim population in particular are sparking new challenges for European democracies that have to be addressed.

- In my view, in European societies, the point is not the private exercise of religion, including Islam, which all respect and protect constitutionally as an individual human right.
- On the contrary, “what most European societies find difficult to tolerate is the public and collective free exercise of Islam as an immigrant religion”, as Professor José Casanova puts it.
- Indeed we need to be extremely careful and avoid stereotypical generalizations of all kinds when trying to understand what is at stake in emerging debates on religious pluralism and democracy.
- It is true that, on the one hand, the situation of Muslims in the various European societies is quite diversified. On the other hand, Muslims are not an undifferentiated group and we cannot conceal major differences in religious beliefs and practices resulting from Muslims’ different national, cultural and religious backgrounds.
- But this cannot be an excuse to deny some common problems and challenges ahead. In Europe, taken as a whole, Islam is closely associated to migration and vice-versa, so that they are almost synonymous. First point to bear in mind.

- Secondly, European democracies are under pressure to grapple with the increased religious diversity of their societies.
  
- Now, how does the latter challenge democratic governance? How does the former answer the new religious pluralism? How does Islam as a minority religious tradition represents a challenge to secularism and secular Europe?
  
- Third point: how can we best promote moderation on both sides in order to resist both to ideological secularism and to radical anti-secularism of some Islamists?
  
- In this regard, I would like to insist on the crucial role played by education for intercultural and interreligious dialogue as a new dimension of citizenship in multicultural democracies.
  
- Fourth point: in more general terms, how can we move from focusing on differences to acknowledging and living at ease with a landscape of diversities? How can we create a coherent narrative for diversity?

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

- I look forward to hearing from you, reflecting on your own conclusions and hopefully on your recommendations.
  
- In times of intercultural tensions such as ours, it is crucial that the Alliance keeps its unique role as a broker and a facilitator.
  
- As a broker and a facilitator, the Alliance acts mainly as an inclusive platform for intercultural dialogue and cooperation aimed at producing small changes in circumstances that in the long run can produce big shifts in behaviour
  
- As a results-oriented initiative, the Alliance has to generate common political will to address problems and stimulate and/or support initiatives on the ground involving all levels of leadership and civil society at large.

- With regard to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, including discrimination based on religious affiliation – Islamophobia, Christianophobia, anti-Semitism -, it is important to take action in many regions of the world.
- It is important to address and reduce fears and concerns of all sides to avoid feeding the cycle of denial and mutual victimization that normally puts actions on hold.
- For me it is crystal clear: intercultural dialogue is the core issue in turning cultural diversity into an advantage. It is a long way but, I am afraid, the only one. It has its up and downs but it is always better to make a small step forward than get stuck.
- Helping to build bridges, address divides and realize rights for all by forging the collective political will is indeed the big challenge ahead of the Alliance but also its *raison d'être*.
- So let's work together to achieve these goals.

Many thanks