Mr. Director General of UNESCO, Rector, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to begin by thanking the organizers of this conference and our hosts here in Japan for the invitation to take part in this preliminary dialogue which we all hope will contribute to making the permanent and constructive dialogue of civilizations a reality. The issue we are discussing here is a crucial one – potentially the most important of all for the twenty-first century – but if we pause to think about its theme we can see that we are already breaking new ground: Dialogue of Civilizations. Please note the plural here: we are more accustomed to talking about “civilization” in the singular, namely the state of being civilized, as opposed to being uncivilized. When we use the word “civilizations,” in the plural, it is generally with the underlying notion of historical succession, one civilization taking over from another. Our theme.

There is an acknowledgement that civilizations can coexist, a recognition of pluralism. Regrettably, I sometimes feel, far too few nations and their leaders are willing to take even that small step of recognition which is surely a precondition for making our world a better place.

In order to have dialogue, we need to start by establishing what the different sides stand for. Let us begin, then, by asking whether we accept the old singular sense of civilization as opposed to that which is uncivilized. Expressed in terms of the colonialism which is still tacitly at work in many areas of geopolitics, civilization is widely understood as meaning Western civilization – at first European civilization, and later that of its offshoot, American culture. Another school of thought sees modern civilization as one which bases its view of the world and of nature on the supposedly neutral principles of modern science, rather than on religion or emotion. In other words, civilization is regarded as a synonym for technology. I am sure that our hosts here in Japan would be the first to point out both that these viewpoints are not only too simplistic, but also that there are ways of reconciling them. After all, your civilization – in the sense of culture, heritage, memories – has stood the test of time for thousands of years, and remains unique. Yet technology is the driving force behind both your economy and your lifestyle today, and furthermore, much of the Western technology which we enjoy in the West actually originates here in the Far East. We can, of course, ask how deep this dialogue between West and East has gone so far, whether it is merely a commercial one, but at least this shows that civilizations not only can be compatible, but benefit from being so. Only by admitting this can we effectively address the question of preserving cultural diversity without becoming isolationists.

When we talk about civilizations we can just as easily use the term “cultures.” One threat that has been widely perceived as following increasing globalization is that of cultural uniformity – in other words, westernization, or more specifically, subjugation to Anglo-Saxon or American culture. However, the splendid paradox of our shrinking world is that it has at the same time brought all the diverse cultural
elements of our planet to the fore, so that all the threads in the global tapestry are no longer remote or in danger of being forgotten. Thus civilization is no longer something homogenous in the way that we see, for example, Greek or Roman culture, but rather a melting pot. Look at Europe: today there are something like twice as many nations as we had only fifteen years ago, after the collapse of the Eastern European power structure. Not all of these nations and ethnic communities have succeeded in living peacefully together, as we have been tragically reminded in recent years. But I do not think anyone would claim that Europe is actually disintegrating as it becomes more openly diverse. Furthermore, not only have the borders been redefined, but people are moving more freely both within Europe and to it from other parts of the world.

As it happens, we are probably living in the greatest age of migrations since the fourth and fifth centuries AD which broadly shaped the cultural map of modern Europe. Then, Roman civilization tried to put up barriers against what it called barbarians, but its empire crumbled because it could not adapt its structures to the new situation. Similarly, we cannot stem this development in the West today, but only try to assimilate it. In many cases, our reasons for taking people in from other backgrounds are purely economic, but we should see them as a rich resource on a cultural level too.

We only have limited knowledge of contact between different civilizations in all but the recent past – and admittedly war seems to have been the conventional way of settling differences. In fact, it is probably only over the past hundred years or even less that we can actually talk about a dialogue in the full sense. Dialogue between civilizations has taken place since very long time. Trade routes have been the vehicle for such a dialogue. Merchants in ancient times, also carried manuscripts and books and were instrumental in spreading knowledge, artifacts and thought. For instance we know that contacts existed between Ancient Greece and Ancient Egypt.

Obviously, often this dialogue followed a war or a territorial conquest, and the coexistence of several civilizations within a given society created frictions, in particular because the conquerors did not want, or could not, acknowledge the civilization of the conquered and wanted to impose a single civilization. Nevertheless, after a period of time, not only these civilizations started interbreeding, but also such a dialogue resulted in great advances in the knowledge and thought of humankind as a whole. Examples are numerous:

I) Al-Andalus (Cordoba in particular) is a case in point, where Christianity, Islams and Judaism coexisted and their exchanges gave impetus to modern medicine, mathematics, physics and philosophy, indeed maybe one of the main factors of European Renaissance;

II) Brazil and Paraguay are another case in point, since the Jesuits fascinated by the social organization of the American Indians, tried to establish the famous Guarani Republics, which did not last, in order to avoid the American Indians of being slaughtered or enslaved. This dialogue of civilizations (Ibero-Lusitanian/ Tupi-Guarani) gave rise to the famous “Valladolid Controversy”, which, thanks to Las Cases, marked the beginnings of public international Law.

About five hundred years ago, the age of imperialism led to much of the world coming under the control of a handful of colonial powers by virtue of their more advanced technology, first shipping and then industry. Relatively speaking
our world has been geographically shrinking because travel has become so easy for us. Now we can discover and explore new nations and cultures without conquest, by simply stepping on a plane — or even from our homes, via the Internet. Likewise, science is discovering more and more fundamental truths about the nature of life on our planet and in the universe, an almost overawing scale. But perhaps the greatest revelation that science has made is not so much about the diversity of the physical world, but the fact that all human beings have essentially the same makeup. The nervous systems that allow us to perceive the world, the brains whose faculties distinguish us from animals: these are all exactly the same, whatever the colour of our skin or the cultural factors that make us evolve into different individuals. And above all else: our hearts are always in the same place. We are a remarkable evolution, because what distinguishes us from the rest of the animal kingdom is our gift of speech and imagination. Language and ideas are common to us all, therefore, but it is only the forms in which they are represented that divide us. In order to live peacefully together, we need to acknowledge that what makes us different from each other is precisely that which makes us essentially the same.

Language is of course an obstacle to dialogue, but we all know this is not an insurmountable one. We all take a pride in the native language we speak, but likewise learning other languages is one of the most interesting tasks anyone can undertake, and a necessity in promoting dialogue of civilization. It is a fact that learning or wanting to learn another language is an act of commitment towards broadening one’s horizons and engaging in dialogue. Just as literacy and later computer literacy have built the foundations on which our societies have developed and flourished, what I call “cultural literacy” could be one of the key skills for the multicultural communities of the twenty-first century. The study of languages is naturally paramount in creating cultural literacy. And I am not just saying that everyone should learn one of the international languages such as English, Spanish, Chinese or Arabic. Native speakers of these languages should likewise be encouraged to learn those of their neighbours to help establish fruitful dialogue on more equal terms. The European Union and The European Parliament have as you know declared this year The Year of Languages — urging citizens to learn at least one foreign language, preferably two to promote understanding of other cultures. Conferences on the subject and around different, alternative methods to study languages have been held these last months all over Europe.

Literature plays an extremely important role in enhancing our understanding of different civilizations, and I feel that writers today should be encouraged in their dual role: to enrich their own cultures by creative use of their own languages, and to enrich the world by displaying their cultures to the rest of us. Writers have been indefatigable champions of the dialogue between civilizations, and need to be supported by official cultural institutions in doing so. The same goes, in fact, for all branches of the arts: in the twentieth century, cultural exchanges often broke the ice when countries with conflicting ideologies were beginning to establish relations. A very important and influential medium today, especially for the younger generation, is the cinema. For many people today their primary acquaintance with Japanese culture has been through the magnificent, artistic films of Kurosawa — which, interestingly enough, are very close in spirit to the medieval sagas of my home country Iceland. National film industries need to be officially recognized and supported as an important cultural vehicle, to help us all on the path towards dialogue instead of watching and listening to commercial monologues from Hollywood.
All cultures have their own versions of the creation of the world, and the ability to conceive of and wonder about such a thing is one of the supreme achievements of the human mind. Religion enriches our own understanding of the world and our role in it, yet is surely also the most divisive and volatile issue for peaceful cohabitation in the world, not through any intrinsic flaw in the principle of religion itself, but rather because man has stripped it of its basic spirit of wonder, self-inquiry and reflection, and replaced it by commands and punishments.

Throughout the centuries and up to the present day we hear calls for “holy wars”. This is peculiar, because what most religions have in common is a fundamental concept of love for one’s fellow human beings. Almost all religions give their respective believers an account of how the world was created and an ethical code by which to conduct their lives in order to find purpose for themselves and achieve harmony with others. An ethical code is a mental mechanism for enhancing human dignity by reflecting on the purpose and consequences of our every action – if you like, a form of dialogue with our own lives. I believe it is through ethics that we can identify principles common to all humankind, and that introducing the teaching of “ethical literacy” would be one of the greatest gifts we could provide for coming generations. Of course, it is quite a challenge to find hard economic justification for spending funds on both cultural literacy and ethical literacy, but I would venture to say that they would ultimately prove very cost-effective. After all, it is cheaper to print books or hold meetings than to go to war. Perhaps the way to introduce the teaching of ethical questions would be to start with precisely this question: is it worth spending money to prompt people into questioning their own actions? Let us not underestimate our children – questions like these fascinate them just as much as computer games or videos.

If we examine our cultures and history on ethical principles, we can find much to criticize in the way we have behaved in the past – and can thereby learn from it. We must not dwell on former mistakes and conflicts, but try to establish why they occurred and what went wrong. Only in this way can we begin to look forward.

You are probably surprised that I have spoken at such length on the dialogue of civilizations without mentioning so far the issue of equal rights for women. We all know that this question cannot be stated too often – but I sometimes wonder when we will no longer need to remind ourselves of it. Signs are emerging, in fact, that the generation now taking leadership in many countries does not consider the “gender issue” to be “an issue.” These people have been brought up to take equal opportunity for granted, and the generation which follows them will probably have even more chance to look ahead without having to dwell on wondering about such a fundamental right. What perhaps worries me more at the moment is the apparent backlash against women in some quarters. In part it is as if the male leadership is saying “here and no further” as women move closer to the very top of society, and in part the stereotyping of women as sex symbols seems to be gaining momentum in the media once again. But I hope that the notion of equality has put down such firm roots in many countries that this will only prove a temporary setback. And of course we all know that there are areas in the world where women enjoy no freedom and have no human rights.

However, the different attitudes towards women taken by different civilizations – or should I say, the different attitudes taken towards women by the men who are in power in different civilizations – represent a major stumbling-block to dialogue between them. Clearly, civilizations cannot engage in dialogue if half their
populations are excluded. Especially since that half shares something that the other half does not. I am referring to the precious emotional bond between mother and child which is, ultimately, the foundation of any civilization. Let us remember too that we seek dialogue of civilizations above all to create a better world for our children, which means that female involvement cannot be sidestepped. It is so obvious how much women in world can contribute in a dialogue between cultures. In peacemaking – to take an example. I have for some time now being considering whether we should not try to arrange a World Conference on women’s issues, attended only by men. I launch the idea here.

(Please allow me to give you an account of cultural diversity or religion from my own country, to show what ethical considerations underlie even our most fundamental view of the world. When Iceland was settled 1,100 years ago, no one entertained the idea that would later arrive, of woman being created from man’s rib. Instead, in the old Norse mythology as retold by Iceland’s greatest medieval historian, Snorri Sturluson, we read about genetic craftsmanship of a more egalitarian and eco-friendly type, and rather less surgical. Two wondrously beautiful trees floated together onto a deserted shore where they were found by the gods, who made them into man and woman. The gods gave them essentially human qualities, and in equal shares: spirit and life, understanding and power of movement; and form, speech, hearing and sight. We note with interest that the gods were not guilty of gender discrimination. The man was called Askr, meaning “Ash tree,” and the woman Embla, which probably means “Elm tree.” Man and woman, according to this myth, are trees, just like the central symbol of the old Viking world, the ash which is the tree of life itself. One of the roots of the tree of life is nourished by the spring of wisdom, and at another root are three goddesses, called Urð, Verðandi and Skuld: Past, Present and Future, who create the destiny of men and women.

This is a motif from a civilization now transcended, but not forgotten, but we can still remain in dialogue with it. One example from millions – and I know that you all have your own personal favourites. With such images in the back of our minds, I am certain we can find plenty to talk about, whatever civilization we represent).

The fact remains that in a world where information is exploding and knowledge is leaping forward at a unprecedented pace, paradoxically we seem to have less and less interest to understand other civilizations in their depth. Except for theologians, few people, either in the West or in East, North or South, can claim to be interested in the great civilizations of this world. People are increasingly materialistic and preoccupied with themselves, often bred by contempt and not care or understanding. Or in the words of the Rector this morning: dialogue between civilizations so often aims not at understanding but winning. It is as if, once more, Cronos had decided to devour its own children who represent the cultural richness and the creative diversity of humankind.

But:

“The children of Adam are members of the same body.
For in creation, they are made of the same essence.
As one membrane moan, others suffer and groan!
said the great 13th century Sufi poet Sa’adi.

And John Donne, the 17th century English metaphysical poet, expresses exactly the same sentiments when he says:
“No man is an island entire of itself;  
Every man is a piece of a continent,  
A part of the main”.  

It is quite clear that ignorance of other civilizations fuels fear (“La peur est mauvaise conseillère”) and fear inspires suspicion, rejection and closing up on one’s self, superficial or approximate knowledge by hearsay creates stereotypes on civilizations, which is counter-productive and does not foster communication. And knowledge of civilizations must be based on study and understanding of texts, beliefs, customs and wisdom as well as cognizance of real people in their diversity. No one can represent by himself or herself a civilization, even at a given time.

In conclusion, teaching history must be the appropriate frame for creating the conditions of such a dialogue of civilizations, but all the other disciplines must be sensitive to this important dimension of education in this era of globalisation. For instance, it would take one minute to a professor of mathematics to indicate that zero, one of the most decisive discoveries in mathematics, is due to Indian thought, or that algebra was first developed by the Arabs, or that the Mayas had a mathematical system based on 20 (as opposed to our 10). I am convinced that children would have another look at and see other civilizations in a completely different perspective if they recognized the importance of the contribution made by other civilizations to the universal knowledge. Needless to add, that I gave this example of mathematics because it can seem the most remote. Other disciplines can be more close to home, such as foreign language teaching.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

For promoting the dialogue of civilizations I would like to recommend the following:

- To carry out systematic survey of positive experiences, worldwide and throughout history, in the dialogue of civilizations, where ethics have played a significant role, with a view of using them later in teaching curricula.
- To undertake a study about ethical systems underlying the different civilizations in order to better understand them and to highlight the convergence around concepts such as human dignity, justice, freedoms and equality.

- To initiate an open forum on the concept of universality in different civilization, so as to understand how universality can be a common aspiration to all civilizations.

- To launch a programme on ethics education, so as to sensitize younger generations to different cultural systems and logics.

I wish you fruitful deliberations and a rewarding outcome.