I would like to open my contribution to this session by remarking that the concept of dialogue among cultures and civilizations is intrinsically bound to the questions of identity and otherness, particularity and universality. This relation is through the role culture and civilization play in composing our identity. On the other hand, universality and particularity are intrinsically linked to the concepts of identity and culture. In this paper I am suggesting that a pluralistic, composite interpretation of identity would have the capacity to overcome divisiveness, and so be able to form a framework within which the goal of dialogue among civilizations could be successfully pursued.

Let me begin with some comments on the concept of dialogue among civilizations itself. Depending on which angle we choose to attack it from, this question rends itself into two separate yet complementary interpretations, which I shall refer to as historical and normative. According to the historical interpretation, Dialogue Among Civilizations is nothing totally new, but rather an ever-present process. Civilizations have always engaged in dialogue with each other and even the bloodiest wars and hostilities have never completely prevented this.

If we look the problem from this point of view, in order to obtain a clear idea of the concept of dialogue among civilizations we have to make a
survey of the ways and methods of dialogue among civilizations throughout history. This is a colossal task that necessitates at least two essential methodological changes.

The first change concerns our approach to history. History has been, and is, often seen as an inventory of antagonisms and wars, and unfortunately this aspect has been given the most prominence. That is why general histories seldom talk of dialogue, preferring to leave this to specialized branches of history such as the history of ideas, of philosophy, of science, and of arts. General histories rather refer to exchange between civilizations, and what they mean by this word is often the exchange of material goods, techniques, and other such components of material life. Thus to look at history from the vantage point of dialogue is tantamount to a methodological change, that is, a shift of axis from conflict to dialogue, to search in history for elements of dialogue, and to attempt to rewrite history as a history of dialogue. It goes without saying that this change of approach should not blind us to the more brutal facts of history.

The second methodological change is the change from an ethnocentric concept of culture and civilization, in which particularity is emphasized to the exclusion of universality, to a concept in which transfer and give-and-take occupy the foreground. In the ethnocentric view of the development of cultures and civilizations, these are both supposed to grow in a more or less closed environment, limited by national or ethnic boundaries. External interventions, and above all wars and invasions, undermine their “organic” growth and put their very existence in danger. It is true that the metaphor of civilization as an organic whole has a certain advantage: by comparing civilization to a living body, we seem to underline its relations to its environment. However, what is usually implied by this metaphor is the
relation of interdependence between internal elements of a culture or civilization rather than their dependence on their environment.

Our problem is thus to define cultures and civilizations as open systems, in such a way that transfer, exchange and dialogue enter into their very definition.

Notwithstanding these conceptual obstacles that stand in its way, such a survey is a necessary prerequisite for the realization of “dialogue among civilizations”, according to the normative interpretation of this term. In this interpretation, which is the first one to come to mind, dialogue among civilizations is an ideal, a project put forward to the world community as an alternative to the dominant approach in international relations that often underlines the points of antagonism and hostility. This dominant approach is best exemplified by Samuel Huntington’s thesis of the clash of civilizations, and for this reason the thesis of dialogue among civilizations is often seen as an alternative response to Huntington’s view.

However, how can we hope for a fruitful dialogue among the different civilizations of today, if we do not possess a more or less clear idea of how this kind of dialogue has been conducted in the past? This is why the two interpretations of the concept of dialogue among civilizations are inextricably related. On the one hand, if we are not well informed about the experience in the past, we cannot begin, or rather continue, this experience in the present. On the other hand, any research into the past is somehow limited by our perspective of the present world and of the role different civilizations play in its constitution.
Both concepts of dialogue among civilizations are thus interrelated. Moreover, both are intrinsically bound to the questions of identity and otherness, particularity and universality. This relation is through the role culture and civilization play in composing our identity.

In its most general sense culture is what distinguishes human beings from other animals and, as such, forms an integral part of our human identity. In fact, we are equipped not only with a biological survival kit, but also with a set of behaviors, customs, and beliefs superimposed on our biological make-up. Thus culture, in its broadest sense, is both a unifying and a distinguishing element. On the one hand, it helps us become aware of our differences with the animal world and, on the other, it is a means by which we know each other and enter into meaningful relationships with one another.

Nevertheless, human culture in this general sense remains rather an abstraction, a concept that presents itself when we try to define the human world in contradistinction to the natural world. When we pass from this abstract level to concrete human societies we find ourselves in a much more complicated situation. Instead of a universal human culture, we are faced with a variety of cultures. It is true that no human society can be reduced to its natural environment, but every human group distinguishes itself in its own way; it is this particularity that enables a human group to distinguish itself not only from the natural world but also from other human groups.

A human group forges its own identity through its culture. As a consequence, those who share this identity are treated as insiders, and those who do not share it as outsiders. It is in this context that the problem of
“we” and “others” arises on a societal level. In the same way that we are aware of our uniqueness through our personal identity, our cultural identity reminds us that we belong to a specific human group.

History presents us with ample evidence of how cultures have served as elements of solidarity within specific human groups and as a differentiating factor between different human groups. From these examples of particularity, history moreover teaches us that neither the focal point around which identities are constituted, nor the frontier lines along which human groups are separated from each other, remain the same.

Sometimes it is language that has played this dual role. We are informed that the ancient Greeks considered those who did not speak their language to be “barbarians”. The pejorative meaning that this term has acquired during the course of history has something to do with its linguistic origin; from the very beginning, the use of this term implied that those who speak other languages do not speak at all, but simply make noises. Thus, speaking another language, they are beyond the reach of communication.

In some other societies this particularizing role was played by myths. People believed themselves to be descendants of certain mythical heroes or gods, and so in this respect different to other ethnic groups who were believed to have other mythical origins. In the Middle Ages this role was relegated to religion, and in modern times this function has been taken up by the modern concept of the nation. The salient point is that, despite these shifts of axis, each of these social entities is accompanied by a corresponding culture that acts as the cement of the society or social group, leveling out the differences existing inside it and highlighting the points that differentiate it from others. Thus we have religious cultures, ethnic
cultures and national cultures. Once more, this point underlines the role of culture in the formation of our social identities.

The view presented above could be known the standard perspective of social identity. According to this point of view, even if some outer aspects of the life of a group change, there is a hard core, which always remains constant. If this core is threatened by external events, the group ceases to exist as a self-sustaining unit; it is either absorbed by other groups or simply vanishes. This view corresponds to the standard conception of personal identity in which every individual human being forms a unique and indivisible unit. What guarantees this uniqueness is his or her personal identity, something which is not subject to change during his lifetime.

This is one of the two extreme definitions that apply to identity. At the other extreme one finds the so-called post-modern concept of identity, in which a person or a social group is seen simply as a node in a network of relations. According to this concept, what are generally considered to be different manifestations of an unchanging core are nothing more than the different relations in which a person might find himself.

These definitions both suffer from the lack of a historical dimension. On the one hand, by its emphasis on the invariable aspect of the life of a person or a social group, the standard definition belittles the changes brought about by varying circumstances; in fact, these changes are sometimes so profound that one cannot hold that their effects are solely limited to the outer aspects of life. On the other hand, the post-modern concept of identity ignores the survival of some elements of the life of a person or a society even when the conditions that have given birth to them cease to exist.
Both these concepts are based on a unitary conception of identity. Both suppose that every person or social group should have a unique identity, the negation of which would naturally lead to the negation of the very concept of identity. Particularity – in this extreme form – results in a monolithic conception of identity and otherness, which is the greatest obstacle to dialogue. How is it possible to enter into dialogue with those with whom we have nothing in common? It is true that some general characteristics are shared by all human beings and by all human societies. But, as has been previously noted, these serve to distinguish human beings from other living creatures. Even some general concepts, such as liberty, human rights, and human dignity, are not precise enough to serve alone as a basis for dialogue. The problem with these ideas is that while no one seems to oppose them, there seems to be little agreement on their exact meaning.

For this reason I would like to propose here a pluralistic view of identity, in which every person or every social group belongs to a multiplicity of traditions and cultures. These traditions should not be confused with passing historical circumstances that do not affect the core identity, and nor should we suppose that the identity of the person or of the group could be solely reduced to these passing elements. In my view, this pluralistic concept of identity not only solves some theoretical issues but also forms the only framework in which the possibility of dialogue can be assured.

Dialogue can begin on the basis of what we have in common, not only as an ideal -- as is the case with human rights -- but as a concrete shared experience. Moreover, dialogue can only be conducted through a common language. However, a language cannot be created _ex nihilo_ and in a matter of months or years.
The thesis I wish to put forward is that if we admit that every identity is a composite one, in the sense that it consists of different, even disparate, elements, then the problem of identity will become relative: any two persons, any two cultures, can be identical in some respects while being different in others. In this case, if absolute identity does not exist, neither can absolute otherness. Identities can therefore become inclusive, rather than divisive. This means that absolute particularity does not exist, neither does absolute universality.

In my view, most historical entities demonstrate this composite nature. Among these entities, this composite nature is best exemplified by civilizations. As is well known, civilizations are large-scale historical identities that go beyond ethnic, linguistic and religious boundaries. To put it more precisely, by focusing on one of these aspects, every civilization creates the possibility of pluralism in other domains. Civilizations based on religion have normally been tolerant in linguistic or ethnic issues, and those with an ethnic basis have normally created suitable conditions for those with different religions or different languages to live together. This is the reason why civilizations have played an important role in the formation of some composite historical identities.

Nowadays, many different entities hitherto belonging to the same civilization are independent nations living within national boundaries. The negative consequences of particularity can be observed in the fact that most of them define themselves solely in nationalistic terms; it is this emphasis put upon unique national or ethnic characteristics that has given rise to many antagonisms, disputes and even wars. In fact, the disastrous effects of the ideology of the pure race are being produced, in our time, by the ideology of a pure nation or culture. The ideology of ethnic cleansing (in
French: purification ethnique) has its roots in the idea of a pure nation, a pure ethnic group or a pure culture.

To remind these modern entities of their common historical past is tantamount to making them aware of their composite natures, to remind them that those who live on the other side of their national boundaries are not absolute outsiders.

I would like to illustrate these remarks with a historical example. In recent years Islamic and Western civilizations have sometimes been represented as examples of particularity, that is to say as completely separate entities, based on different and even mutually exclusive world-views. I do not wish to discuss the origins of this misunderstanding, but the fact remains that the problem is not a new one. It can be traced back to the middle ages, when these two religions were engaged on a merciless struggle on military, religious and cultural fronts. However, the point often overlooked is that, even in medieval times, these two civilizations were not as totally separated as is usually supposed. Both of them possessed composite identities, in which some level of universality can be observed in the many things they held in common.

Apart from their common religious background, that is to say the same monotheistic tradition to which they belonged, they were both heirs of the Greek and Hellenistic cultures. This common intellectual tradition provided a shared language through which all medieval thinkers, in spite of their confessional differences, could communicate with each other. Thanks to this common heritage, the world-view and the intellectual categories of someone such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna) in Iran and Saint Thomas Aquinas in the far West were very similar. Despite the fact that these two thinkers
belonged to different religions, societies and cultures, they concerned themselves with the same problems, according to almost the same intellectual categories, even if they proposed totally different solutions. This was true not only for great figure such as Ibn Sina and Saint Thomas, but for any enlightened and cultured person belonging to the scientific elite of Islamic society or of late medieval Christian society. What united them was their common scientific and philosophical culture, a culture going back to the Greek and Hellenistic thinkers. It is for these shared points between different cultures that we must search.

It must be stressed that universality should be interpreted as the discovery of things one holds in common with different cultures, rather than the dominance of any one particular culture or value system – although this is a potential result of increasing globalization. In this way universality and particularity need not be mutually exclusive; a conceptual coexistence can be therefore struck between them in which common values and principles can be applied to problem-solving whilst diversity is respected and protected. This awareness of common values and problems can replace the divisiveness to be found when different cultures concentrate on their own particularity with a new sense of inclusivity, as a direct result of engaging in dialogue among civilizations. Such a dialogue must recognize diversity as an asset and work towards the establishment of a general sense of joint responsibility.

I think education is the fundamental and effective tool by which we should clean the present mental mine fields and pave the way for the introduction and the establishment of such coexistence through which we can move to transcend the existing cultural, national and ethnic barriers. It is in this way that we can overcome the ethnocentric concept of culture and history in
order to create a climate in which a constructive and meaningful dialogue among civilizations is able to thrive.