On the occasion of the visit of
His Excellency, Seyed Mohammad Khatami,
President of the Islamic Republic of Iran,
and
His Excellency, Abdelaziz Bouteflika,
President of The People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria,

to UNESCO

Speech
by
Ambassador Hans-Heinrich Wrede
Chairman of the Executive Board

UNESCO, Paris, 5 April 2005
H.E. President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Seyed Mohammad Khatami,
H.E. President of the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria, Abdelaziz Bouteflika,
President of the General Conference,
Distinguished Ambassadors, Dear colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Mr President, permit me to begin by saying once more how pleased and honoured I was to be invited to your beautiful country just a few weeks ago. I had a most informative and enjoyable visit, thanks to the generous hospitality the wonderful Iranian people have accorded me.

(1) I am equally happy and privileged to welcome you here at UNESCO. Today marks the 7th Anniversary of your proposal, Mr President, for a 2001 ‘Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations’. As nations, communities and people, we have come a long way since the 53rd General Assembly of the United Nations when you, Mr. President, stated: “Among the worthiest achievements of this century is the acceptance of the necessity and significance of dialogue and the rejection of force, the promotion of understanding in the cultural, economic and political fields, and the strengthening of the foundations of liberty, justice and human rights.”

(2) We are deeply grateful for your initiative. Indeed, the world is in desperate need of more dialogue. Dialogue is not to be feared, but embraced. The ‘Millennium Declaration’ of September 2000 puts it succinctly: “Differences within and between societies should be neither feared nor repressed, but cherished as a precious asset of humanity”. And this, distinguished audience, is a shared responsibility!

(3) Yet, Dialogue can only succeed if we respect the common values that bind us. All of us have committed ourselves to respect human rights while, at the same time, upholding cultural diversity and safeguarding our cultural identities. We are duty-bound to defend these rights. We cannot say one thing and do another. UNESCO’s ‘Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity’ clearly states: “No one may invoke cultural diversity to infringe upon human rights guaranteed by international law.” We must, then, do more than just pay lip service to the respect of human rights. Rather, we have to actively work for their full realization including, in particular, the full implementation of equal rights for women in all spheres of life.

(4) UNESCO, like the United Nations itself, was founded in the belief that dialogue can triumph over discord, and that the world’s peoples are united by their common humanity far more than they are divided by their separate identities.
(5) Today, we are also honoured by the presence of the distinguished statesman and President of The People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria, Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Mr President, welcome! You have been a most dedicated protagonist in your country’s independence struggle. You are an outstanding leader of the group of non-aligned countries, and you have served most nobly as President of the 29th UN General Assembly.

In your exemplary efforts to advance the noble cause of dialogue, you declared: “If the lives of men can be measured in terms of years, ideologies in decades, and nations in centuries, then the unit measuring civilizations, born of the interaction among peoples, would be the millennium”.

(6) Let me express to you UNESCO’s gratitude for the most competent service our Algerian and Iranian international civil servants are rendering to this Organization. They are wholeheartedly committed to UNESCO’s mission.

It gives me particular pleasure to acknowledge our esteemed colleague, Mr Mohammed Bedjaoui, whose impressive career encompasses the high position of President of the International Court of Justice at The Hague. At present, Judge Bedjaoui is the Chairman of the Finance and Administrative Commission of our Executive Board.

And, of course, I take pleasure in pointing out our distinguished colleague, Ambassador Jalali, who served so brilliantly as President of the 31st General Conference.

(7) We shall spare no effort to make UNESCO even more effective in promoting the principles of tolerance and freedom, of equality and mutual respect. This challenge will only be met with success when all of humanity is free from the threat of hostility and discrimination and when harmony and understanding finally prevail.

(8) I do wish you an inspiring and instructive brainstorming session. I congratulate you on having invited a great number of such internationally renowned thinkers. They will certainly ensure that a rich diversity of ideas will be debated this evening.

Thank you again for being with us here in UNESCO’s Executive Board room.