



One People – One Goal – One Faith

Presidency of the Republic

**OPENING CEREMONY OF THE HIGH-LEVEL
GROUP OF THE ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS OF
THE UNITED NATIONS ORGANIZATION**

**SPEECH BY
HIS EXCELLENCY
MR. ABDOULAYE WADE,
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC
OF SENEGAL**

*Dakar
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Mr. Prime Minister,

Distinguished Ministers,

Mr. Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations,

Mr. Desmond Tutu, Nobel Peace Prize,

Mr. Secretary General of ISESCO,

Distinguished members of the High-Level Group,

Representatives of International Organizations,

Mr. Secretary General of the Organization for Peace and Security in Europe,

Ambassadors,

Ladies and gentlemen,

By gathering in Dakar, following the meetings held in Palma de Majorca and Doha, and before the forthcoming submission of its report to the Secretary General of the United Nations, the High-Level Group for the Alliance of Civilizations has chosen to honour our capital.

The stated goal was to create a worldwide movement to combat divisions, prejudices and misunderstandings between cultures, especially Islamic and Western cultures.

It is with great pride and pleasure that we welcome you to African soil, to Senegal, a place of meetings and exchanges, home of the teranga, in our common quest to achieve peace between all the peoples of the world.

The idea of an Alliance of Civilizations, put forth during the United Nations General Assembly of September 2004 by the President of the Spanish Government, Mr. José Luis Rodríguez ZAPATERO, supported by the Turkish Prime Minister, Mr. Recep Tayyep ERDOGAN, and by our Secretary General, Mr. Kofi ANNAN, represents in my view an excellent initiative.

The idea comes at a time when the world is marked by much strife, and echoes the appeal made by President Mohammad KHATAMI in 1998 on the occasion of the Dialogue of Civilizations.

I myself advanced the idea of a World Summit on Islamic-Christian Dialogue, which, in my view, should be brought to the attention of world leaders who are in a position to communicate a powerful message of tolerance and understanding that would reach present and future generations. I had the opportunity to discuss this question with the Prime Minister, President Zapatero.

The challenge, of course, is a very large one in the current context of humanity, forever haunted by the demons of ignorance, intolerance and misunderstanding, which provoke tensions and conflicts, put us at a crossroads.

You will allow me, ladies and gentlemen, to try to clarify the concept of civilization as well as that of Alliance. Since very often, it is the differences in the understanding we have of words that create difficulties when it comes time to act.

Before coming here, I looked up out of curiosity the word *civilization* in the Larousse dictionary. The more I read, the more I became disconcerted because not only were the definitions and examples oriented, but no single definition

truly captured all the dimensions of the problem. From the outset, the word *civilization* was assimilated with the idea of progress whose material connotation – material goods of course was quite clear; *a priori*, this places the reader in a position where the degree of civilization is measured on the basis of the accumulation of material goods. Who says that our technological society, which creates what tomorrow can destroy us, the atom bomb, the destruction of the atmosphere without which no human or animal life can exist, the destruction of the environment, had no alternative? Who says that by founding our “civilization,” first on coal in the nineteenth century then on oil in the twentieth, the very oil that is now in the process of destroying, under our very eyes, to general indifference, the economies of non-producing nations whose only fault is not having oil reserves on their territories while those that do continue to amass enormous riches that they do not know what to do with?

This uncontrolled upward spiral of energy prices is increasingly serving to guide choices towards nuclear energy. In the end, some fear this new orientation could have catastrophic consequences unless humanity decides to pursue

equality opportunity energy solutions because they are non-polluting and because they are more equally distributed around the planet: namely solar energy, hydraulic energy and biomass.

More alarming still, in the cases that we see, is the total silence about black Africa and black African civilizations. Who is talking with whom? Exactly, because the yardstick is biased toward the assimilation of progress with the accumulation of material goods. Is man's mission on earth to accumulate objects or rather to find harmonious solutions to his relationship with both the natural environment (material goods of course) and the human environment (social relations) on the one hand, and on the other, to develop spiritual and moral values that comfort him in his relation with the universe (which is the domain of religion and philosophy)?

Such a definition excludes no group of people whereas the concept of civilization/material progress led directly to the philosophy of the civilizing mission, and hence to colonization.

Because it is a question of alliance, this definition supposes that we are going in the same direction and that we have decided to combine our efforts in order to achieve common objectives.

The biggest problem, in my view, is not to impose a notion of civilization because, by doing so, a core value set is established which in turn becomes defined as a universal standard. The right course of action requires a great deal of humility and a return to original values in order to better understand them, and perhaps enrich a value set so that it becomes universal and encompasses values such as respect for human life, the right to life, human rights and freedoms, women's rights, which appeared hardly three centuries ago. Today, these freedoms are ignored in many countries but also in countries that adopt strict definitions of values. What is the "value" of industrial civilization which is not yet even three centuries old and which presents itself as the only model?

I believe that a reflection in the sense of an alternative solution, especially in the area of energy, is indispensable if we do not want to see our problems worsen.

For all these reasons, we should insist on a definition of civilization and not simply presume its meaning.

Events of these last years give the impression of a widening rift between the West and the Muslim world whereas, as we just saw, religion is only one dimension of civilization. However, it remains a dimension that can, inversely, exert an influence on civilization. Before the advent of revealed religions, there were civilizations, in the sense we have specified. Nubia, Pharaonic Egypt, Meroe, Sumer and Mesopotamia are among the best known examples.

The recent blasphemous caricatures of the Prophet Mohammad (*Peace be upon him*) represent an example of ignorance and poor judgment. And also of lapses.

Can one reasonably, in the name of a so-called freedom of expression without limits, recognize the right of an individual

or group to offend in such a provocative way a community of over one billion individuals around the world? Muslims, luckily, did not reply in kind, because Jesus (Issa) is a prophet cited in the Holy Koran.

Certainly extremism in its current forms and manifestations is not only limited to blind physical violence. It also follows the tortuous roads of what appears like an intellectual debate, but one that hides, in reality, a genuine intention to harm. It is therefore on all these fronts that the battle has to be waged without concession.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, humanity engaged in a reflection on the large questions because of the perceived threats to its very existence. As well, both religions, Islam and Christianity, both draw on the same monotheistic source: the God of Abraham (Ibrahim for Muslims), of Moses or Moussa, of Jesus son of Mary – Issa ibn Mariam – and also of Mohammed, peace and salvation for them.

From there comes the injunction made to Muslims in the Holy Koran: *“Say: We believe in Allah and (in) that which had*

been revealed to us, and (in) that which was revealed to Ibrahim and Ismail and Ishaq and Yaqoub and the tribes, and (in) that which was given to Musa and Isa, and (in) that which was given to the prophets from their Lord, we do not make any distinction between any of them, and to Him do we submit.” (Koran, Verse 2, Soura 136).

Even though the subject at hand is not the “Alliance of religions” but the “Alliance of civilizations.” Allow me an incursion into Islamic thought.

The Koran refers to numerous revelations in the Holy Scriptures that preceded it. The stories of Adam and Eve, Noah, Jacob, the Virgin Mary (whose name, by special privilege, is borne by an entire surat), are authenticated facts in the Koran and accepted by all Muslims.

The Torah, the Bible and the Koran all teach the sublime unicity of God. They advocate what is good and forbid what is evil; call for spiritual revelation; and preach moderation, forgiveness and charity.

History teaches us that as of the year 617, cordial relations strengthened by bonds of mutual confidence and respect existed between Islamic Arabia and black and Christian Abyssinia.

Likewise, the Prophet Mohammed included in his entourage tribes of diverse cultural and denominational origins: the peoples of the Hedjaz, Persians, and blacks including the famous Muezzin Bilal, Jews and Byzantines.

When in 631, Mohammed received a delegation of Christians from Najran, discussions took place in his own mosque without anyone having taken offence.

These few examples among many others provide a convincing counter argument to the nefarious doctrine of the chock of civilizations.

They also and above all illustrate that by creating the Alliance of Civilizations, we are walking down a path already cast by past generations, a path that allows us to rediscover the foundations of the Holy Scriptures. We must not conflate

religion with its harmful interpretations regarding political motives, which have other agendas.

Muslims and Christians must refuse the use of religion for political ends, hence giving it a meaning that it does not have, if one refers to the Holy Scriptures.

In the end, the real and fundamental question that we must ask ourselves is to how human societies were led astray from this path – to the point of giving rise, with the passage of centuries, to violent and internecine confrontations.

We will not be able to advance on the path to peace if we do not accept to look at history objectively, as it actually transpired. And from many points of view, that history is not pretty.

Twenty-first century humanism therefore – which represents the challenge of the Alliance of Civilizations – will consist, in my view, of seeking the foundations of a new vision of the Community of Nations, freed from the scourge of ignorance and denial in which all forms of extremism find their source.

Such a project is based on the generosity of spirit and the courage to confront taboos, to question dogma, to overturn old habits of thought and to conquer the fear of the other and the instinct to dominate.

To the assertion of Thomas Hobbes that man is a wolf to man, let us rather oppose a wiser idea from our own culture, namely that man, in his deepest nature, is a remedy for man (ouolof proverb).

Let us strive to ensure that each society, in a genuine effort toward reconciliation with others, can find the means to free itself from the prejudices and other personal biases that leads it, often wrongly, to believe that it alone incarnates the best of civilization.

It is in the aim of contributing to this new vision of more pacific relations between peoples and the civilizations that they represent, that I proposed a Summit on Islamic-Christian Dialogue. And I hope that your meeting supports the idea of this dialogue, which should offer an occasion to rally the

leaders of this world and ask them to share a message of historic importance.

In a word, the question is to know if it is possible to enrich, together, a set of core values. The nexus of these values would be the *common denominator* of all human civilizations, through the effort of thinkers and above all the education of children. A culture of peace begins with the education of children. Is this building-block project that I am proposing to intellectuals, far from the brilliant approaches of ephemeral effect, not the path for establishing long-lasting peace on earth?

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope that your thoughts will also bear on this proposal in relation to the report that you will submit to the Secretary General of the United Nations.

It is on this optimistic note that I would like to conclude as you begin your work. I wish you much success.

Thank you for your kind attention.

