

Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like first, on behalf of ISESCO, to congratulate the OIC Permanent Observer Mission to the United Nations Office in Geneva on its commendable initiative to convene this prestigious forum, in celebration of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

It gives me pleasure to extend my heartfelt thanks to the Permanent Mission for inviting ISESCO to this Forum, for all its good feelings towards me, and for the successful organization of this event.

Also, I avail myself of this opportunity to convey the best regards of the Director General of the ISESCO, Dr. Abdulaziz Othman Altwajri, to the OIC and to all the institutions present in this Forum.

Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

As an intergovernmental organization acting within the framework of the OIC to develop education, science, culture and communication within Member States, ISESCO wholeheartedly supports the convening of this Forum.

This contribution, however, sometimes went unnoticed, due to the fact that some ill-advised parties still view Islam as a religion that is not compatible with human rights. This is a fat that Islam's history, past and present alike, proves to be false, to say the least.

Most of the Islamic countries, who fought for and gained independence from colonialism, have since then concentrated their efforts on achieving complete national integrity. This process is still underway in some countries where national integrity has not been achieved in a world fraught with economic challenges and rival powers.

ISESCO has illustrated, over its 27 years of existence, the aspirations of Islamic countries to human rights in its publications and in the international meetings it organized or in which it participated. Its contribution to these forms of exchange with regard to the notion of human rights and of freedom, builds on the premise that society is a global entity with material, spiritual, social and psychological needs, and that these aspirations are driven by adherence to human rights principles.

If Muslims happen to have a different conception of the essence and philosophy of human rights, this is explained by cultural diversity which entails that societies differ in their approach to this or the other essence and philosophy. However, Muslims share the universal values of freedom and human rights. The adoption of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and its integration in the constitutions of most Islamic countries is a good illustration of this willingness to abide by these values.

With regard to the contribution of ISESCO to the 1st session of the Forum on the theme, **“Human Rights and Cultural Diversity – Challenges and Perspectives”**, my paper will tackle the following points:

- **Universality of human rights and cultural diversity;**
- **Islamic Declaration of Cultural Diversity;**
- **Interaction of human rights and cultural diversity.**

1. **Universality of human rights and cultural diversity:**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, like the Declaration on the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789, constitutes one of the milestones in the history of mankind where men and women alike, conscious of their responsibilities and duties towards their fellow, solemnly proclaim the advent of a new order in relations between human beings and the States, on the one hand, and between the States and the citizens, on the other.

The peculiarity of the 1948 Declaration resides in the fact that it was adopted after and because of the bloodiest conflict ever witnessed by human history.

Preserving human beings, protecting their rights and ensuring the exercise of these rights are some of the challenges and the perspectives by which the application of human rights are gauged. During these sixty years, substantial progress has been achieved, but new challenges have cropped up because of the numerous tension spots and the widespread poverty in some areas of the world.

If we can remember the date of proclamation of this Declaration, it is certainly because, as before, the universality of human rights is but a project. Aside from calling human rights into question, one has to point out that there are different approaches which, as mentioned before, are the result of a cultural diversity concerning some aspects, but there are also conflicting interests. Therefore, the international community is duty-bound to work jointly in order to reconcile differences and open new avenues for human rights.

In this regard, the cultural rights of individuals and peoples enshrined in Article 27 of the 1948 Universal Declaration have been consolidated by the international conventions of UNESCO on tangible and intangible cultural heritage of humanity, and of course, on cultural diversity.

In this current situation of world civilization where cultural diversity is threatened by the hegemony of major powers; and being unable to imagine what global civilization would be like in the future, but confident that cultural heritage should remain, for generations to come, more of a key factor for the balance of personal identity than a mere nostalgia, we consider it an absolutely indispensable necessity to protect cultural diversity and preserve its universal character.

By way of protecting its culture from potential threats a community may tend to isolate itself, allowing for cultural aspirations to politically transpose into ethnic claims. But in politics ethnic claims often are found to be totalitarian. For this reason, the Islamic Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which was approved by ISESCO Member States in Algiers in 2004, point out that the ideal would be to recognise the diverse cultures within a nation as constituent parts of its integral identity.

## 2. **Islamic Declaration on Cultural Diversity:**

The Islamic Declaration on Cultural Diversity stresses the necessity for a solemn recognition of the principle of cultural diversity. This Declaration calls for the establishment of dialogue of civilizations, cultures and religions, in line with the aspirations of the Muslim world. It also considers cultural diversity as part of the universal heritage.

The Declaration emphasize, quote: **“Islam is a divine path and embodies a human way of life. And Muslims are confident that since culture is the expression of the genius of a people, there is no justification for conceiving of a culture as being either sublime or mean and lowly. Each culture has its own genius, and is distinctly prolific and enlightened ... {It is their belief that they} ought to clinch to and stand up for {their} cultural and civilizational identity, which interacting with the other civilizations and cultures.”** End of quote.

The Islamic Declaration also states that there is no such thing as an “enemy” culture or an “enemy” nation; and that the Islamic culture is one which advocates progress and intellectual creativity, cultivates a spirit of mutual respect and preaches peaceful coexistence with other cultures across the world.

The Islamic Declaration clearly emphasizes the universality of cultural diversity, and the Islamic civilization’s solidarity with other civilizations.

## 3. **Interaction of human rights and cultural diversity:**

Cultural diversity is the extension of cross-cultural dialogue. Together with human rights, cultural diversity creates an environment of mutual trust between peoples and states, unleashing a new form of humanism, away from individualistic thinking.

Accepting the “otherness” is the core of cultural diversity. It means accepting their difference and respecting this as a source of intellectual and cultural enrichment. Respect for the “Other” is a fundamental principle of human rights. This means that in order to make of human rights a concrete reality it is important to recognize the right to difference and to cultural exception. The World War II is a grim reminder that enormities could be committed by those who wrongly believe in their ethnic and cultural supremacy.

Furthermore, the dramatic events which took place since 9/11 caused the West to cultivate a negative image of Islam and Islamic civilization, henceforth likened to intolerance and violence. In the meantime, Muslims are largely subjected to aggression, spiritual and moral, as a result of blasphemous publications and statements.

The suspicious environment that resulted from such events, only to be fuelled by extremists from both sides, undermines the gains achieved in the field of human rights and cultural diversity. Paradoxically, Islamophobia generates Islamism.

Mindful of the harmful affects such idea, born of some almost unreasoned fear of the ‘Other’, might have on cultural diversity, the international community needs to maintain its vigilance and work tirelessly to promote human rights and cultural diversity in education and various cultural activities.

**Conclusion:**

The Forum of the OIC Permanent Observer Mission, which constitutes a remarkable contribution to the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, comes almost one month after the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Claude Lévis-Strauss, one of the leading 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers who contributed a great deal to the recognition of the principle of the equality of cultures and the universality of human rights. In remembrance to this great thinker, I should like to quote from his speech on the occasion of the celebration of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of UNESCO in 2005. His are fine words that admirably sum up the present and future challenges relating to the issue of human rights and cultural diversity. He said, “{...} **the respect that we wish to obtain from every human being towards cultures that are different from their own, is only a special instance of the respect that should be felt towards all forms of life.**” End of quote.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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