

The *Alliance of Civilizations* is a proposal to prevent a wall of hate and incomprehension between the West and the Arab and Muslim worlds. It wants to help end the causes which lie behind Islamic terrorism. This initiative was put forward by Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero of Spain.

Since the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, which caused death, injury and loss to innocent people, radical Islamists have perpetrated terrorist attacks, which have ended the lives of both men and women from countries in the five continents. It is within this new international context and due to a surge of insecurity that the Spanish Prime Minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, proposed before the 59th Session of the United Nations General Assembly the initiative known as the *Alliance of Civilizations* (September 21, 2004). In his speech, he made clear that 'terrorism has no justification ... but its

roots can and should be known; it is possible to do so and one should think rationally as to how it occurs and how it grows, in order to combat it rationally.' He also added that terror should be fought within national and international law regarding Human Rights and the United Nations.

The aim of the initiative is for all the citizens of the world to unite in placing their universal citizenship before their condition as citizens of a country, religion or civilization. The *Alliance of Civilizations* has received support from more than 30 countries, including the Iberian American Community of Nations which, from a proposal of Argentina, carried out a Special Communiqué at their San José Summit (Costa Rica, autumn 2004). It also received the support of Arab League countries, to which the Spanish Prime Minister addressed himself at the Algerian Summit on March 22, 2005, when this organization was celebrating its 60th

anniversary. The *Alliance* has also received the support of several European Union countries, including Germany, France and the UK.

Turkey, a country in which Muslims, secular people, and those of other creeds co-exist and which has numerous political and complex alliances, decided to co-sponsor the initiative through its Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Erdogan and Rodríguez Zapatero requested the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, to designate a High Level Group to channel the proposal. Kofi Annan took on the initiative and also called on the international community to join the project on July 14, 2005. The High Level Group will develop a report with recommendations for carrying out this alliance between peoples and nations and for designing a plan of action, to be presented in Madrid at the end of 2006. Spain and Turkey announced that they would keep on co-sponsoring the initiative.

In September 2005, Kofi Annan established the High Level Group, which is chaired by Federico Mayor Zaragoza (UNESCO Director General, 1987–99) and Mehmet Aydyn, Turkish minister in charge of religious affairs. The High Level Group includes prominent figures such as former Iranian President Mohamed Jatami, Nobel Laureate Desmond Tutu, Alenjandro's Library Director Ismael Serageldin, former Indonesian Foreign Secretary Ali Alatas, and Mrs Mozah Bint Nasser Abdullah al Missned of Qatar and Enrique Iglesias, Secretary-General of the Ibero-American summits and former Inter-American Development Bank President, among others.

The Alliance of Civilizations not only aspires to be a framework to end the causes of terrorism, but also aims to be a bridge between cultures, helping to create a climate of tolerance, understanding, comprehension and dialogue in the context of democracy and respect for Human Rights. It aims to help overcome the present threat to world peace represented by terrorism that targets innocent, ordinary people.

Some observers and analysts, however, have not given much importance to this initiative, which has been termed as well intentioned, but not very feasible. Others ignore it completely because it has no concrete action plan yet and or because both the participation of the Spanish President and the call from Kofi Annan were not enough to get a large hearing in the mainstream media. Constructing peace requires great efforts that often go largely unnoticed in many societies and their media. However, an example that dialogue is possible between the West and the Arab and Muslim worlds can be found in the Process of Barcelona, which turned 10 years in 2005, and which gathers the Heads of State and Government from both banks of the Mediterranean and whose continued dialogue process has been praised by all, ensuring peace and co-existence.

Certainly, the Alliance of Civilizations will be an initiative that will not have an

easy existence and success, but its great value lays in the ideas that sustain it. On one side, it recognizes that the world is made up of different cultures and civilizations and that humanity should be committed to their co-existence, advocating peace and world security, which are essential and core elements of the United Nations. On the other, it makes no concessions to terrorism, which it considers is unjustifiable. It is important to keep in mind that this initiative has arisen from Spain, which has suffered from terrorism for thirty years.

The question in this GUNI Report is whether universities can contribute to the Alliance of Civilizations' objectives. Society has traditionally entrusted universities with resolving its great problems as well as the realization of opportunities through state-of-the-art research, as well as through the education of future generations. It may be true that sometimes universities have not given the most adequate answers or have not risen to expectations. However, they are the best prepared and equipped of all social institutions to do so. The majority of the great (and also small) discoveries, inventions and innovations have been carried out in universities and have contributed in a positive manner to improving the well-being of people, expanding life expectancy for example. Universities also train the leaders of society, so universities have a lot to say and contribute in a project that promotes co-existence of civilizations.

Higher education should be understood as a quality public service, which ensures access by merit and has a strong social commitment. In the world we live in, it is no longer viable to look upon the universities as 'ivory towers', because society no longer accepts it. The 'ivory tower' model also betrays the original mission and reason of university. University activities should now be pertinent to their social context. Besides, universities are coming under increasing pressure to be accountable for their actions, not only because they use financial resources but also because society questions the rea-

sons that lie behind teaching programmes or why universities advance along specific lines of research.

Universities are fundamentally dedicated to creating new knowledge through theoretical and applied research and to spread this knowledge by means of teaching to new generations of citizens, and not just for a degree, for now they also offer education throughout the students' whole lifetime. University education is not just a stage in the lives of people who gain access to it, in which they acquire knowledge, techniques and skills, society also expects universities to educate their future leaders in values. Often these values are embedded in implicit form in knowledge, techniques and skills we teach our future generations. Sometimes, values are completely explicit in some universities and careers. It is for this very reason that from understanding cultures and civilizations universities can help make the world a better place.

The challenge of world peace and the mutual understanding and interdependence of civilizations is gigantic, but universities have repeatedly helped societies assume gigantic challenges in the past, such as ending diseases that decimated entire populations. Our own evolution as civilizations implies that universities have repeatedly faced up to new challenges every day. Universities had to be flexible and adapt themselves to new challenges constantly. Just thirty years ago there were no environment or sustainable development studies. Today, many universities offer them at a graduate or post-graduate level. They have even mainstreamed it in subjects such as engineering, architecture, and so on. Is it possible to mainstream something so fundamental to improving the well-being of Humanity as coexistence?

The picture of higher education in the world is very diverse, but now more than 110 million people are studying in thousands of higher education institutions. The expansion of enrolment is growing fast and larger sections of society have access to higher education, especially in

developing countries. This means that larger segments of the population can be educated in values at university level. European countries, for example, are building a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) known as the Bologna Process aimed at ensuring an accreditation of degrees and the free circulation of students and faculty with the aim of

increasing enrolment even further. In the context of revision of study plans in EHEA countries, we should not lose the opportunity to invest in values, so that new generations can make the co-existence of civilizations a reality.

On the issue of the Alliance of Civilizations, universities should, again, be ahead of their time, with the instruments that

they have always had: the capacity to generate new knowledge that helps understand life and how to advance in it, to disseminate such knowledge, so that it can be used by society. Universities must ensure that society does not forget the values that are required for the construction of a new, more harmonious, sustainable and peaceful world.

NOTE

- 1 Sources: speeches given by the Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero before the 59th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, and before the Summit meeting of the League of Arab Nations; the article by Máx-

imo Cajal (2005) 'Alliance of Civilizations' in *El País*, July 4, 2005; and other news briefs which have appeared in Spanish newspapers *El País* and *La Vanguardia*.