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## **Clash of civilisations or dialogue of cultures: building bridges across the Mediterranean**

*Check Against Delivery*  
*Seul le texte prononcé fait foi*  
*Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Bibliotheca Alexandrina and Anna Lindh Foundation Lecture

**Alexandria, Egypt, 6 May 2006**

Minister Aboul Gheit,  
Ambassador Taher Khalifa,  
Dr. Traugott Schoefthaler,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here on what is my first visit as European Commissioner to this great city. Let me thank the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and the Anna Lindh Foundation for hosting this discussion. Intercultural dialogue is **the** defining issue of this decade, if not this quarter-century. The sooner we take steps towards a meaningful dialogue of cultures, the sooner we can set to rest the dangerous myth of the clash of civilisations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The very name "Alexandria" is resonant with the common heritage shared by the peoples of the Mediterranean and the world's three major religions. The bibliotheca of ancient times was part of an unprecedented movement for the scientific study of the earth, and a pooling of scholarship from around the Mediterranean and beyond. Documents from that time reveal the cosmopolitan nature of ancient Alexandria where Arab, Christian and Jewish traders and scholars mixed freely and developed new ideas.

Indeed, for hundreds of years while the great empires of Greece and Rome held sway in the Mediterranean, north Africa and Gaul, the middle east and Iberia were unquestionably part of the same political and cultural world. And scientific, cultural and political exchanges were part of the fabric of daily life.

Unfortunately however, that spirit of exchange, of commonality, has since been lost. Our forefathers in the ancient world would be astonished at the deep division which today lies across the *Mare Nostrum*.

Mutual exchanges have been replaced by mutual incomprehension. Yes, our major religions stem from the same root, belief in one god and the revelation of the book. Yes, the principles of behaviour which guide a good Jew, Muslim or Christian have more in common than we might think, like the concept of caritas (Latin), tzedaka (Hebrew) or zakat (Arabic). And yes, the issues our societies are facing are very similar – reconciling old and new values, demographic and economic changes and finding jobs and opportunities for the young.

But there is no denying that something has gone wrong in our relationship. We in Europe cannot turn a blind eye to the deep-seated resentment, anger and frustration felt throughout the Muslim world. Nor can Muslim nations ignore mounting European concern about violence, economic deprivation and political frustration in parts of the Muslim world.

One element is the longstanding failure to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, despite, I should add, the leading role taken by Egypt time and again in bringing the two sides together.

The reaction to the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed also showed the gulf of misunderstanding between us. Around the world Muslims were outraged at what was perceived to be at best ignorance, and at worst provocation of their religion. Europeans on the other hand were shocked and baffled by the strength of feeling and, in some cases, violence, this evoked.

Mutual respect and understanding should be our watchwords. And a dialogue of cultures is the way to stop talk of a so-called clash of civilizations. That way we can make clear that Europe has heard the message from the worldwide Umma.

We regret the offence caused by the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in some European newspapers. Freedom of religion is non-negotiable. It is a fundamental right of individuals and communities. It entails respect for the integrity of all religious convictions and all ways in which they are exercised. Similarly freedom of speech is central to Europe's values and traditions. It is also non-negotiable. But it does come with responsibilities.

Are these two principles in conflict?

That is a difficult question which has preoccupied philosophers for centuries. The answer changes with time and circumstance. But two elements are clear. First, it is unacceptable that any one group in society – Christian, Muslim, Jewish or secular – seek the sole right to fix the parameters. And second, respect and understanding are the keys to any acceptable outcome.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of our time is to overcome this mutual incomprehension and to rediscover an earlier conception of the Euro-Med region rooted in a mutual understanding of our common identity. We must see the Mediterranean not as a barrier separating the peoples of its shores but as a bridge for commercial, social and cultural exchange.

To do otherwise in an era of globalised threats and opportunities, when Europe depends on the South as much as the South depends on Europe, is to neglect our responsibility to future generations. The terrible attacks in Sinai two weeks ago were just the latest reminder. Let me take this opportunity to express my heartfelt sympathy and condolences with the victims, survivors and their families. Our thoughts are with you.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We need to be constantly working to improve understanding between different cultures and religions both within the EU and around the world.

That is why I wanted to come here today, to a city which symbolizes freedom of thought and intellectual inquiry, tolerance, and learning, to **send a strong message about intercultural dialogue, respect, and understanding**. Too much time has been wasted in speculation about a clash of civilisations. The real threat is a clash of ignorance. Difficult though it may be, we must seize every opportunity for dialogue and foster mutual respect and understanding.

Some of the building blocks are already in place – today Alexandria again hosts a centre for learning, tolerance, dialogue and understanding. As we see when we look around us at this beautiful library. Education is a vital component in increasing mutual understanding and the European Union is offering the Egyptian government concrete financial and technical support to meet its education targets.

This great city also houses the Anna Lindh Foundation for dialogue between cultures, our co-host today. The Anna Lindh Foundation which bears the name of a tireless champion for women's rights and for the Euro-Med region, whose dynamism the Foundation echoes in the breadth of programmes it's developing.

Our young people are a particular target of the foundation's work, through projects on Euro-Med popular music, school magazines and encouraging scientific and information technology exchanges. The Bradel-Ibn Khaldoun Higher Education Network is just one example of the many cross-border networks to promote our young peoples' learning and mutual understanding of one another.

In addition there are programmes promoting women's rights and networking female students and academics. And workshops promoting artistic creation in fields such as theatre, music, modern dance and arts, including travel grants for young artists from across the region.

Of course promoting respect and understanding applies not only to our relations with others, but also at home. An important element in defeating the scourge of terrorism is tackling the conditions which encourage support, tacit or otherwise, for terrorist activities. That means economic development and freedom of political expression, giving people the means to address their grievances through the political system and a reason to hope for the future.

These issues are not easy to deal with – in Europe we have learnt to our cost the price of failure in integrating our minority populations. Although we are proud of our religious, cultural and linguistic diversity the scenes from Paris last year and the revelation that London's bombers were home-grown underlined the degree of alienation felt by some.

There are no easy answers, indeed we still need to understand more about the problems before we can take steps towards the solutions. But the European Monitoring Centre of Racism and Xenophobia to provide data and analysis is a positive start, as is the Euro-Med seminar later this month on Xenophobia and Racism in the media. We also have a number of European laws on equality, action plans and programmes to help integrate minority populations and ensure fundamental rights like freedom of expression and freedom of worship are upheld.

I know Egypt has also been taking steps to preserve freedom of religion and open up the political system, and I shall look forward to discussing this with your President and Prime Minister tomorrow.

I shall also be discussing with Amr Moussa how the EU can work more closely on these issues with the Arab League. In keeping with its sense of responsibility and leadership in the region Egypt has always played a prominent role in the Arab League and as such I hope you will encourage our greater involvement in this forum. Certainly when I attended the Summit in Khartoum on behalf of the European Commission last month, there seemed to be marked interest in exploring all possibilities.

Similarly, we are interested in developing closer relations with the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, and are currently discussing how best to do so. Mr Ihsanoglu and I talked about this at some length in Khartoum.

Speaking to the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly earlier this year I issued a challenge to the participants: let's make 2008, the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, our target date for putting a serious dialogue of cultures in place.

The Bibliotheca Alexandrina and the Anna Lindh Foundation will be two important components in this as we seek to involve all levels of society – public institutions, religious and cultural leaders, civil society and the media – in increasing cultural exchanges, improving understanding, promoting tolerance and deepening respect. It is vitally important that we reach beyond the elites to the man and woman on the street.

The European Commission has produced a ten-point plan to put the Euro-Med partnership at the service of a new dialogue between the EU and Islam. We will make better use of the media and reach out to public opinion, host events bringing together civil society representatives, academics and parliamentarians, and focus particularly on promoting exchanges between the young people of our region. Above all we will promote a human rights culture based on the universal values embodied in the UN instruments and which all nations in this region have embraced.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As representatives of the brightest and best of a country which has always played a positive role in Euro-Med relations and in promoting peace and harmony throughout the wider region, I hope I can count on you to take my message of mutual respect and understanding to a wider audience.

It is in everyone's interests that we draw a line under the misunderstandings and irritations which have poisoned our relations of late. Our task now is to work for a better future for us all – for the peoples of the Euro-Med region, and beyond.

I know the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and the Anna Lindh Foundation will play their part, but this will require effort from all of us. I urge all of you gathered here today to think of yourselves as participants in an ongoing intercultural dialogue and to work as individual emissaries for peace, tolerance, mutual respect and understanding.

Thank you.