It is always with considerable emotion that I enter this temple of peace and I take the floor bearing in mind the words that summarize the mission of UNESCO: “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that defences of peace must be constructed”.

Certainly, today we are not talking about war, but what is the difference between war and the Jewish Holocaust? Was not the Holocaust a war on the Jewish people?

Human memory linking man to his past and giving a meaning to his present is often short, and sometimes selective, which is why it needs reminders so that the past, in its authentic form, is safeguarded against oblivion, deliberate omission, and falsification.

This is the reason why we have gathered here.

All credit is due to Mr. David de Rothschild, President of the FMS, who launched this initiative, and Mr. Koichiro Matsuura, Director General of UNESCO, who has graciously accepted to extend his organization’s patronage to this conference. I would like to congratulate them very warmly for this.

Because we believe that the human race is one, and yet rich in the diversity of its cultures and civilizations, we are here as citizens of the world who share the same will to save the integrity of history for the benefit of present and future generations who, warned of past tragedies, will be better equipped to prevent their repetition. Among such tragedies stands the Shoah, never equaled in its scope, its cruelty and the science and technology that were used for extermination. These make the Holocaust a real affront to reason.

While the survivors of the Holocaust are still among us, while all the material evidence of this crime are visible and palpable, while there is an abundance of testimonies, certain individuals have taken it upon themselves to falsify or even deny this part of human history. We refuse to have our memory so dangerously maimed or distorted. The revisionists and deniers are certainly not numerous, but we must think of the future, when all the witnesses will have disappeared and all future generations will have will be written documents that must not be contaminated with skilfully concocted forgeries.

The worst attitude is one of doing nothing and waiting, in the hope that truth will prevail by itself and things will sort themselves out. But we must be vigilant and ready to fight untruths, without concession, on all fronts.

There is an interesting parallel between Holocaust denial and the revisionism of slavery which lasted for five centuries and colonialism which robbed us of our natural resources, not to mention the contempt and disregard for our values.
The fact that today there is a genuine cooperation between present generations on both sides in Africa, Europe and America must not mean that we forget the past or distort the facts. We must turn towards the future while accepting our common history.

Should this imposture be confronted with silence? No, for silence is the most reliable ally of evil. Let us ponder the wise words of Edmund Burke, the Irish philosopher and statesman of the eighteenth century: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

It is precisely because of this silence that the “final solution,” the monstrous doctrine seeking to exterminate the Jewish people, could be made into a theory and put into action.

The Holocaust symbolizes absolute evil. It is both a moral and a physical affliction. In fact, the numerous forms of humiliation, the round-ups, the deportations, the tortures and other inhuman and degrading treatments sought to rob the victims of their humanity first before taking their lives.

We are not accountable for what has happened in the past. But as human beings, we all share this legacy and are guardians of its integrity. The evil has been done, but its memory makes it incumbent upon us to ensure that it will not be repeated.

To say nothing, to do nothing is to place our own destiny and that of future generations at the mercy of the deviation of deniers and thus open the door to recidivism.

Nothing guarantees that humanity will be definitely immune to repeating the horrors of the past.

Our common concern should be to make sure that Holocaust deniers’ theses, today in the minority, would not be able to grow in strength by exploiting naivety and ignorance, the hotbed of obscurantism and extremism.

Here lie all the merits of the Aladdin Project, for it emphasizes culture, education and information as the means of countering Holocaust denial. To remember, to reflect, to educate and to act, it is through this battle of ideas and actions that Holocaust denial theses will be vanquished and relegated to the only place they merit: “In the depth of libraries, among other debunked theories.”

In my position as the current President of the Islamic Conference Organization and coming from a country where different religions coexist peacefully, I am delighted to see that the Aladdin Project seeks to define a Jewish-Muslim dialogue. It must be forcefully stated that contrary to preconceived ideas and simplistic clichés, there has never been historical contentions among Muslims and Jews. On the contrary, from the Charter of Medina in 622 to Arab-rulled medieval Spain and the Ottoman Empire, history teaches us that in different periods Jews and Muslims have been able to live together in peace and respect each other. Jews were often protected by Muslim monarchs.
The challenge today is to build on this common past the foundations of a sincere dialogue to overcome mistrust, fight against all forms of extremisms and learn again to live together and respect our differences.

It is in this sense that I have always recommended Islamo-Christian dialogue at the level of world leaders. Following in my footsteps, His Majesty King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, has organized a three-way dialogue at the United Nations among the followers of the great religions of the world. It is in this spirit that we are organizing a Forum of Three Religions in Dakar in cooperation with a number of Jewish and Muslim groups.

The unique God, whom we all, Jews, Christians and Muslims, invoke, has not made any race superior to the others. Everyone must therefore have the courage to free himself of prejudices that propel him to think that he incarnates the best of human civilization.

In these early years of the twenty-first century, the tendency towards a monolithic viewpoint remains one of the dangers that threaten our world. This monolithic viewpoint emanates from the certainty that one sole culture, one sole civilization can determine the standards of life and behaviour and that everyone else should be measured, judged and condemned against these very standards.

The fact is that, beyond the universally recognized norms, nothing is more relative than the values of culture and civilization. The truth of one epoch does not necessarily hold in another era. The truth for one people may not be the truth for another. What is a norm in one society may be a negative value in another society.

The dialogue of cultures and civilizations can only blossom and prosper in relativism. This is well illustrated in a piece of African wisdom collected by the longtime companion of UNESCO, Amadou Hampathé. The story has it that one day Thierno Bocar goes to visit his spiritual mentor in Bandiagara in Mali, about an issue that had caused disagreement among the believers. The mentor’s response was: “One must always assume that the other person has part of the truth, and not say that the whole truth belongs to me, my country and my race… No! The truth does not entirely belong to anyone.”

François Fenelon, a French priest and writer known for his opposition to fanaticism, preached in the same spirit against the feeling of conceit and self-importance that can nestle in man: “He who thinks he knows everything is so ignorant that he does not even recognize what he is lacking.”

It is in recognizing the equal dignity of all cultures and civilizations and in admitting that each culture and each civilization has its part of the truth that we can build a better world for all. In this era of human fraternity, there can be no place for domineering instincts or superiority complex. We must therefore denounce all abuses and all forms of injustice. Impunity and selective justice can only generate frustration and vengefulness.
I thank you for your attention.