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Organización  
de las Naciones Unidas  
para la Educación,  
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Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

**Address by Irina Bokova,**

**Director-General of UNESCO**

**on the occasion of the High Level Event on Today's Struggle to Protect and  
Preserve the Cultural Heritage of Religious Minorities**

**Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 20 September 2016**

Dr Thomas Campbell, Director, The Metropolitan Museum of Art,

Ms Evan Ryan, Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Friends,

I wish to thank all participants of this initiative.

I believe this is the 4th such event with the Metropolitan Museum and the State Department, here in the United States and in France, with the Louvre, to raise awareness to safeguard the shared heritage of humanity.

In a context of rising violence and intolerance, I believe a key way to fight back, is to foster even more knowledge, more respect for human rights and cultural diversity, through stronger advocacy, stronger alliances.

This is the purpose of this meeting... in this stunning place of culture, of tolerance -- I can hardly think of a better place for our meeting than this world museum.

This is UNESCO's message in Turbulent times -- a message of unity and solidarity, based on human rights, for living together and tolerance.

This is embodied in the 1972 Convention, expressed in the core concept of outstanding universal value.

Across the world, we see cultural heritage of religious interest on the frontline of conflicts, fuelled by violent extremism.

This is not collateral damage but deliberate destruction, which is a war crime -- it has become a tactic of war to spread fear and hatred.

This is tied to the persecution of individuals and minorities on cultural and religious grounds, and this is why I call this “cultural cleansing.”

Last November, I met with representatives of cultural diversity of Iraq, in Erbil -- I remember looking around the room and feeling I was looking at the history of humanity... in its all diversity... in all its fragility.

I wish to commend the Department of State for its leadership in raising awareness, in crafting new alliances for action, and for our deep partnership in these crucial tasks.

The United States Congress, the European Parliament, the Parliament of the United Kingdom have declared Yazidis and Christians victims of a genocide.

Let me single out Congressman Jeff Fortenberry for his voice and leadership.

There were 1,5 million Christians in Iraq in 2003, they are less than 400,000 today -- I voiced my concern in launching an appeal with Cardinal Bechara Boutros Rai, Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, at UNESCO last year.

UNESCO's vision is expressed in the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* -- the defence of cultural diversity is an ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for human dignity. No one can invoke cultural diversity to infringe upon human rights.

This heritage means everything to minorities – fundamentally, it belongs to all of us.

This is not about protecting stones.

This is about defending people, identities.

This is about defending human rights and the humanity we all share.

I was honoured to be in Timbuktu last year for the opening of the 14 mausoleums we rebuilt that had been destroyed by violent extremists – this is how we must respond, by bolstering confidence and restoring expressions of identity.

Last August, the International Criminal Court opened the first trial for the destruction of the mausoleums, with UNESCO's support – this is how we will end impunity and we will support taking this further.

We must halt the illicit trafficking which contributes to financing terrorism -- I commend the efforts of the Honourable Eliot L. Engel for the adoption of the *Protect and Preserve International Cultural Property Act* last May.

We have strong ground to build on -- including the UNESCO 1970 Convention against illicit trafficking -- we must do everything to translate commitment to action.

Cultural heritage is on the frontline – we must move it to the front of peacebuilding, for the resilience and development of all societies.

As Assistant Secretary Ryan said, this is vital for peace today, to defend our common history.

Thank you.