

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,  
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by  
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(UNESCO)

At the inauguration of the UNESCO Chair  
for the study of comparative religion

Tashkent, 13 September 2000

Mr Chancellor,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

To inaugurate this UNESCO Chair for the Study of Comparative Religion here, at the Islamic University of Tashkent, is not only an honour, and a pleasure, but also the fulfilment of an awesome historic legacy.

Uzbekistan is heir to a literally fabulous tradition of religious learning, one that extends back thousands of years. Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Greek philosophy, and the spirituality of Islam were all successively taught in Uzbekistan's ancient cities, by celebrated scholars whose fame has extended throughout the Asian continent, indeed all over the world: one need only mention here names of the rank of Avicenna, or al-Biruni, giants of world thought, who flourished here a full millennium ago.

Tashkent's Islamic University is therefore one of the most fitting sites that could be imagined for the founding of a UNESCO Chair like this one. The UNESCO Chairs are part of a world network dedicated to furthering comparative knowledge of the scriptures, spiritual traditions, and cultural orientations of the world's peoples, in order to promote international understanding, respect, and peace. Eight such Chairs already function in as many countries, and more are planned. As the United Nations Organization committed to education, science, and culture, UNESCO deeply believes in the mission of these Chairs to promote a spirit of tolerance, based on the soundest scholarship and the most exacting academic standards.

Respect for the culture and creeds of other peoples and communities must be taught from an early age, but institutions of higher learning like these are necessary to explore, in far greater depth, the many mutual influences, and borrowings, that have gone into weaving the rich tapestry of the world's great faiths and philosophical schools. Every religion is a vital, organic unit. But just as no people is "ethnically pure", and no civilization is "culturally pure", so the world's spiritual traditions have all been vastly enriched when hearts and minds were open to the teachings of many diverse sources. No religion, and no culture, can dwell in secluded isolation. We must learn to exist together, within the living societies of today.

Avicenna and al-Biruni together stand out among the towering intellects of all Islamic civilizations, for their profoundly perceptive approach to the best in Greek philosophy, which they adapted to their reading of the Koran. Al-Biruni further travelled to India to learn Sanskrit and translate the scriptures of Hinduism. If any one individual might be considered as the world's founder of comparative religion, this would undoubtedly be al-Biruni, a scholar in many disciplines - from linguistics to mineralogy - and perhaps medieval Uzbekistan's most universal genius. UNESCO's Chair in Tashkent could hope for no more

eminent model figures, to inspire the new flourishing of such studies in Uzbekistan today.

Just as peace requires tolerance, so is tolerance based on knowledge. The UNESCO Chair in Tashkent, like his sister Chairs around the world, will train teachers to teach in turn; facilitate travel for instructors and students; and encourage meetings between institutions. Every scholarly initiative, like this, which sees the light, is a further window of the mind opening onto the world.

I therefore wish this new Chair in Tashkent Islamic University every possible success.

Thank you.