We are assembled here to debate "Faiths and Cultures within Conflict and Dialogue." Taking this very phrase as a motto, I beg to state at the outset, that there is but one answer to the question posed at this forum; the so-called clash of civilizations is not "unavoidable" after September 11.

In plain terms, there is nothing fatal, pre-destined, or commanded by historical logic that allows us to say that there shall necessarily be a clash of civilizations because of, or after what is now commonly called 9/11.

Going a little further, here are some points to consider:
1. Much as it has traumatized America and the world as an act of unprecedented terrorism and criminal horror, September 11th is not the "end of history" (Fukuyama's expression so often misused) nor is it in the same vein the beginning of a new history. I don't think it really is the A.D. one of a new era, or the mark of a post-revolutionary age, such as with the short-lived 1789 Calendar.
2. Furthermore, what happened on September 11th of the year 2001 was not, in itself, a confrontation between two civilizations, nor has it produced a clash, or micro clash of civilizations. The war against terrorism - even if described as a novel species of crusades - is no more an act of civilization than was the terrorist attack on the Twin-Towers, as none of us would dare apply this "category" (in Aristotelian terms) of civilization to Ben Laden's Al-Qaida or the Taliban régime.
3. What, then, happened on September 11th?
It was an act of war, in its most barbaric form, certainly, a vicious act of war, a crime against humanity.

As expected, this act of war led, understandably, to its natural antithesis: a counter-war against terrorism at large, unfortunately described as a crusade. A word that caused endless debate, in the most confused and confusing manner, on Islam, its philosophy, its history, its culture, etc, ... and as if Ben Laden was the uncontested leader of the Muslim world, and his Al-Qaida, a temple of Islamic worship and philosophy, and Afghanistan the model of the Islamic polity of the future.

A confluential to this debate could hardly be avoided; is there a defining line between, on the one hand, a legitimate war which uses - such as in Hiroshima -
exceptional mass destructive violence, and on the other hand, irresponsible terror committed against humanity, and, can we say likewise: a crime against civilization? Since, the paradox posed to every government after Hiroshima and Nagasaki: in acts of war are there any cultural - not to say moral - limits, in the use of weapons destructive of civilization? And, since a paradox always engenders another: does superiority in science, hence civilization, entitle a nation that can produce weapons of mass destruction to use these weapons against a nation of a different culture, or - shall we say - of a lesser civilization? And would this be described as a clash of civilizations?

Allow me this footnote to what may have appeared as a futile intellectual exercise. (However, is it merely a footnote?)

Not content with the degree of sophistication displayed on September 11th, Ben Laden, we are told, is using the utmost that western scientific research has attained in certain fields, to prepare for his next assault on the citadels of Western civilization; bio-chemical inventions which were experimented on animals, in front of cameras, now to be used as lethal weapons against humans.

Does that make it a clash of civilizations? And, which of Islamic or Western civilizations is the source of Ben Laden's vicious strategy?

A Ben Laden, we are reminded day after day by the western media, who was trained by the CIA and used along with the Taliban, to build an Islamic barrier against the advance of atheist communism during the Cold War... and was dropped later when this war ended. We all know, don't we, that Ben Laden's so-called 'Afghan terrorists' are now operating in Algeria, and elsewhere, and not against America, but working to disrupt Muslim societies to which they are alien. The massacres they are perpetrating, unrelated to and unintelligible by any standards of civilization, are acts of pure terror and absolute violence, symptoms of a culture of death, a universal epidemic endangering societies in every part of the globe, including America.

And... as one footnote leads to another, would Muslims be warranted tomorrow, when and if Sharon uses the nuclear weapons he threatens to use, be it in a moment of despair - would then Muslims be warranted to say that this would be a clash between Hebrew civilization and their own?

And what crusade or what jihad will then have to be waged, and which of God's names will then be this or that party's alibi?

In a more earthly vein, I find at this juncture no better philosopher to quote than Emmanuel Kant. Has he not pleaded, though a Prussian, for "Perpetual Peace" in the most visionary manner when he warned that the progress of science, unbridled by morality (I can't remember if he said religion), will imperatively lead to a total destruction of humanity?

In the somber days we are living in, with the UN Charter rendered obsolete precisely by those who proposed it and signed it first, and the International Declaration of Human Rights violated every hour of every day, in every corner of the
earth, the high priests of political pragmatism might find some inspiration in the
simple treaty drafted, as far back as 1795, by the founder of modern philosophy.

Ladies and Gentlemen, to those of us who are eager to forecast a clash of
civilizations forced upon humanity by some historical determinism, I beg to say that
there are broader horizons to look at rather than the current opposition between an
Islam taken hostage by terrorism, and an America which claims to be the sole
defender of a heritage to which Islamic civilization has contributed more centuries
than the whole of American history. And, particularly if we remember that ideologies
are a lesser concern to modern nations than economic interests. No grand designs for a
better society are susceptible of being attained by strategies similar to those presently
experimented, with less than relative success, in Afghanistan and central Asia. Their
search for peace is breeding more wars than victories, and more misery than welfare.
If, indeed, this is a clash of civilizations, its only outcome will be the destruction of
whatever civilization there is on either side. For no liberty will emerge, and certainly
no foreseeable peace, as every so-called pacific settlement is leading to a new source
of conflict. Witness the exacerbation of religious tensions in the Indian continent, and
- who knows? - maybe before long in South-East Asia and China.

There and then, around the Pacific Ocean on the Western frontiers of the USA,
will the clash of civilizations really acquire apocalyptic dimensions. Islam, then and
there, will become a negligible factor, if at all. And there shall be no Ben Laden to
chase.

Ladies and Gentlemen, our time here is too short to sum up all the lessons of
what happened on the 11th of September and since. A few observations are however
worth noting from what is commonly said and so often repeated:
1. The era of civilizing the one world we are living in by colonial or imperial wars, is
over.
2. Mondiality is possible, and will be universally accepted, if it respects diversity and
multiplicity, not the reverse. A common search for governance respecting
fundamental human rights cannot be conducted by violence, but only in the
conviviality of peace, justice, and respect of otherness.
3. We have to de-globalize tensions and conflicts. Progress and culture are not
produced by an obsessive search for global clashes of civilizations, but by the
interaction of different civilizations coexisting within, and not projected outside, the
national as well as the supra-national societies.

Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to conclude by what may appear a personal
note. I come from a Holy Land where we have learned to love Saints and Prophets
alike. In Jerusalem, we do not seek to divide an indivisible civitas dei, but to partake
of its oneness. In Damascus, we are discouraged by the presence of zealots in a city
that was once an imperial capital of Islam when a Saint, by the name of Saint John of
Damascus, was a minister of the Caliph, yet able to write the first Summa Theologica
questioning Moslem theology, and survived unharmed. In Beirut, we have suffered
twenty-five years of wars during which every possible regional conflict and revolution was projected into a naturally conflictual plural community. Yet we emerged undivided, constantly searching together for new principles of liberty in unity, anxious to continue to build, notwithstanding the war, more square meters of homes, offices, schools, and factories than what warriors destroyed.

Finally as a Christian Arab, I feel proud of Cairo which still harbours the oldest university in the world: Al-Azhar, now the Muslim religious counterpoint of the Vatican, which is transcending the ongoing debate between modernity and fundamentalism to unequivocally condemn Ben Laden and religious terrorism. Cairo takes me back, as there is always a part of Islam in every Oriental Christian, to reminiscences of an Andalusian city like Cordoba, once Arab, where the statues of Averroes (Ibn-Rushud) and Maimonides, the two greatest philosophers of Islam and Judaism, still stand face to face in the main town square, undestroyed by the reign of Isabelle la Catholique.

Our message to you all, to our American friends in particular, is a call to revive the heritage of a Mediterranean world, which assembles us here, today. Long before America chose to assume the unchallengeable leadership of the liberal world, our successive cultures were inherited from each other, century after century, millennium after millennium, the ideals of liberty and humanity, which left an indelible mark on all arts, all literature, and all sciences. Their imperial civilizations stopped at no frontiers of language, race or religion.

The morale we should draw from their ecumenical, nay even cosmic approach is one: that the farther we look towards the future, the deeper we must draw from the past.