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Focus: al-Andalus – the Three Cultures

Welcome Address

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This is the second time that the Academia Europaea has held its Annual Meeting in Spain. The first time was in Barcelona in 1996, where we discussed topics relating to cultural continuity and change in the Western and Eastern Mediterranean. Now, once again, we return to Spain, to the fascinating city of Toledo, a city that has played such an important role in the course of European history, contributing uniquely to both its intellectual and cultural development. We will pay special tribute to the city's heritage throughout our conference programme, which began so wonderfully with our session on 'Music and Culture' in the Toledo Cathedral. I would once again like to warmly thank all the contributors to this truly successful inaugural session, which ushered in this year's meeting, but above all I would like to heartily thank our host, His Eminence Cardinal-Archbishop Antonio Canizares, represented by the Dean, Monsignor Juan Sanchez-Rodríguez; I thank as well Jaime León for his musical contribution on the organ – a treat which signed off our session yesterday in an especially festive mood. I am greatly pleased by how many participants have joined us for this meeting and the associated conference, and I am glad to be able to welcome so many guests.

Let me briefly introduce the Academy. The Academia Europaea was established in 1988. The ideas behind its foundation and the principle goals that we set for ourselves are similar to the objectives of any Academy of Science, but this one in particular has always been oriented towards the European level, in order to promote a unified approach towards European science and higher education. The aims of the Academy were, and still are, ambitious, yet well within our reach. We attempt to promote a broader appreciation of the value of European scholarship and research in all fields of learning, to encourage interdisciplinary and international research within these fields, particularly regarding issues unique to the political, cultural and economic constellation of Europe; to identify topics of importance to science and scholarship; to encourage the highest possible standards in research and scholarship

and, last but not least, to promote a better understanding among the public at large of the benefits garnered through knowledge and learning. Let me add, as I have done many times before, a few words about the science-policy goals we hope to achieve. As is widely known, there are numerous actors fighting for space on the turbulent European stage. Brussels, it seems, changes its advisory bodies in the sciences the way some people change their shirts; and every institution with serious intentions in the European arena, such as the European Science Foundation, Euroscience, ALLEA and our Academy as well, are attempting to assert their own special set of interests in science policy matters. Thus, despite our original intention to be the transnational European Academy, we have long since been forced to make room for many new players on the stage. Taking stock of this crowded cast of able competitors, it is crucial that we continue to develop a more refined concept of our own initiatives, that we sharpen the Academy's public profile, and that we form proper alliances in an environment that is growing ever more competitive. Our main aim is to give the Europe of the scientists a voice in the public arena, a strong, prominent voice. Already, a great deal has been achieved towards reaching these goals, but our efforts have not ended and if we don't tread carefully, better organized institutions and institutions with more stable financial backing could easily supplant us. Unfortunately – and I find myself forced to mention this every year – in financial terms we are far from the strongest candidate in the race.

But we should not dwell on the negative, for there are many positive matters to be reported. Foremost, let me remind you that the Academia Europaea has contributed significantly to bringing the European Research Council into life, a development that represents a massive step forwards in European science politics. With this new institution, it has already become a commonly accepted notion that the Europe of science does not merely require resources for path-breaking technology-oriented research, but for fundamental research as well. Without a basis in solid fundamental innovative research, applied research would be feeble and blind. Of course, this is familiar to the scientific mind, but the political mind still has to understand it. And one should not forget that this concept will include stronger participation of the humanities. Up to today, the humanities have been systematically neglected and under-appreciated in European policy. We have responded to this challenge in various ways. We have organized three separate conferences relating to the humanities, the last of these in cooperation with the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Science, whose President Günter Stock, a new member of our Academy, is warmly greeted. Furthermore, we have agreed on a statement of purpose concerning the role of the humanities in Europe, a statement that emphasizes the importance of the humanities in a manner that reaches even ordinary citizens, stressing the relevance of the humanities in spheres beyond politics and economics. This conference will – or so I dearly hope – provide a significant contribution to this

process of understanding by harkening back to that great dialogue blooming out of the dawn of the Renaissance, the idea of a humanist unity among diverse cultures. Please allow me to offer a few introductory remarks to ease us into this admittedly immense topic.

Culture is evolution after the discovery of the 'mind' or 'spirit', that untranslatable German '*Geist*'. Culture forms the true core of humanity, and science itself, in the German sense of '*Wissenschaft*,' is in turn also the expression of culture. Science is capable, as al-Andalus illustrates in such an impressive historical fashion, of uniting diverse cultures. The city of Toledo, which is treating us to such wonderful hospitality over these few days, is an especially remarkable example of the historic interplay of unity and diversity. Toledo – the city of the Papal councils (in the years between 400 and 702, 17 councils are recorded) – is a city of science and culture, all shaped through a unique symbiosis of Muslim, Christian and Jewish traditions. Even today, Toledo's school of translators is renowned, for it attracted scholars from all parts of the then known world, lending new life in Europe to both Greek philosophy, which had long been taken for lost, and the closely related Arabic philosophy. Translations from Greek to Arabic made between the eighth to tenth centuries, from Arabic to Latin between the 12th to 13th centuries, and in part to Romance languages, such as Ancient Castilian, altered the course of Europe's intellectual development. Thus, a truly European centre of learning came into being, documented in part through the various efforts of the Castilian scholar Dominicus Gundissalinus, the French scholar Petrus Venerabilis, the Italian scholar Gerard of Cremona and the British scholar Michael Scot. The list of Greek works that were translated from Arabic into Latin by this venerable school includes such standard works as Euclid's 'Elements', Theodosius' 'Spherics' and Archimedes' 'Dimensio Circuli'. The Arabic versions were in no way regarded as inferior substitutes, utilized due to historical exigency, indeed they were even regarded as the authentic master versions.

Thereby, a good translation is always more than just a translation. A good translation is also a form of grasping, or understanding, which gives voice to the spirit of the original text, even while running the risk of misunderstanding – a danger that can often paradoxically reveal itself to be an opportunity. This is just as true today as it was then: only when the spirit of a text and the spirit of a reader – in this case, the translator – are allowed to merge, does a text begin to take on life, to step forth from the shadows of history; only then does the text begin to speak our language. The critical point here is this: in Toledo, science and a culture shaped by science were taken as one common world, not as dividers, but as 'uniters'. A society that was hungry to learn created for itself a common scientific and cultural basis. Aristotle's advice, that whenever one is striving for new knowledge, to remind oneself of 'those who have considered the truth

before us', takes on an entirely new concrete meaning in a way of thinking and a cultural practice, which no longer allowed different religious orientations to be considered 'untranslatable', and thereby impassable barriers.

Within that piece of Aristotelian wisdom, there is also a lesson hiding for our world – a world that is engaged with problems of identity and integration and that has begun to paint a bleak future for itself in the shape of a 'clash of civilizations', expressed in the sense of a 'clash of different cultures'. A language that unites, because everyone understands it, is the norm, a self-explanatory fact; a language that divides is the anomaly, something that is not self-explanatory, something in need of explanation, or even translation. Hence, it is not just a coincidence that all myths concerning the origin of language and languages assume the existence of a common primordial *ur*-language, which is spoken and understood by all, instead of recounting a multitude of languages, all with their respective ancestry. Comprehension is what is self-explanatory, non-comprehension what needs explanation, and therefore a common language is also self-explanatory. A common language is the actual medium of integration. It leads the way as a common language into a common world.

Yet, does all of this mean that individual cultural identities, which are a constant topic of discussion in political and other contexts, will dissolve under the unity of a common language, or that in the place of multiple identities, one single, dominant identity will emerge? Concepts of individual and collective identities are difficult concepts. They imply a unity (or totality), which has never existed as such. The fact is often overlooked that we constantly move within many identities, which, in turn, represent our existence. Sociologists label these identities as different roles, which we are, to a certain extent, *aware of*, but are also to a certain extent *comprised of*, and this includes the roles we play in private, public, intellectual and religious settings. To reduce all of this to one role, one single identity, would mean reducing the diverse roles down to one particular functional identity, making the diversity of roles mere aspects of the arbitrarily chosen primary one. For example, and here we have one of the most popular forms of 'identification reduction' in the present, just taking into account one's religious role alone. But that would be a grave mistake. While there may be more or less dominating roles in the life of an individual or society, there is not just one, from which everything else can be derived.

Correspondingly, cultures, as we speak of them today, are not monolithic and are not identities in the narrow sense of the term. Cultures are characterized, parallel with the concept of social roles, by various elements, and it is these various elements, philosophical, religious, artistic and scientific, through which we distinguish cultures, not through simple identities. In al-Andalus, the elements that constituted a common world among Muslims, Christians and Jews were, above all, philosophy and science – philosophy in close conjunction with

science, and science in the form of the quadrivium and medicine. Even today, we can still draw lessons from this: whoever cannot differentiate, whoever thinks in reductionist terms of all-encompassing identities, such as the religious reductionism common today, blocks his own path to understanding cultures.

That is my opinion of the myth released to the world in 1993 by Samuel P. Huntington, foretelling that future conflicts (Huntington is dealing with 21st-century politics) on a global scale will become less and less political, ideological and economical, and will tend instead towards a predominately cultural nature, resulting in a 'clash of civilizations' that will be the root cause of all conflicts. As is always the case with such grand simplifications, many necessary points of refinement have been tossed out along the way, while the grand claims extend beyond the scope of provability, such as one can plainly recognize in Huntington's claim that the core of all cultures consists of certain basic values that exclude the possibility of any sort of intercultural coexistence. Yet culture, certainly in the modern sense of the term, consists precisely in the ability to productively negotiate differences, even those that stem from certain basic assumptions, values, or partial identities. Al-Andalus is a particularly telling example of this process, for right here three cultures that are so separated in their religious convictions, nonetheless comprised a productive unity in their philosophical and scientific elements.

Furthermore, in a globalized world, all matters of culture must be addressed anew. The economic sector is already busy taking care of its homework in this field. Can the same be said in a wider cultural sense that takes both scientific and religious moments into account? Most likely not, for it seems that we are lagging behind. And as far as scientific and religious matters are concerned, al-Andalus provides a real-life model to demonstrate how one can take both the divisive and the cohesive elements of culture to coordinate a common way of life. This is because whoever seeks to combine the religious side of a culture with its scientific side under a single aspect, sacrifices the nature of religion, and whoever seeks to combine the scientific element of a culture with its religious elements under a single aspect, sacrifices the nature of science. Faith and reason may share elements in common – e.g. the insight that reason cannot set its own conditions – but faith and science cannot. Science follows standards of rationality, which, if applied to religion, would not strengthen, but instead weaken, religion. The same can be said if the situation is reversed.

Al-Andalus has become a symbol of a symbiosis of diverse cultural traditions – including scientific, artistic and religious traditions. Is it just a curious coincidence that Daniel Barenboim harkens back to al-Andalus in his efforts to build a bridge between cultures and has chosen a monastery near Seville as a recital hall for his West Eastern Diwan Orchestra? Is al-Andalus a myth for Europe, as has once been stated (by G. Bossong)? Most likely it is, in the sense of a concrete utopia that draws its claim to truth from a successful historical realization. These

are, among others, the topics that will be addressed in the coming two days, in the course of what promises to be an impressively diverse programme. Its scope ranges from musicology and literature to almost all aspects of science and medicine in a historical perspective, dealing with the dialogue of three cultures and our European heritage. I especially congratulate our local organizer of this programme, Professor Manuel Velarde, who has done a wonderful job, and I thank all of our sponsors: particularly the Sociedad Estatal de Commemoraciones Culturales, the Caja Castilla la Mancha, and the Empresa Pública 'Don Quijote de la Mancha'**.** I thank as well all speakers on the programme, some of whom have travelled from afar, for their help in the programme's realization. And I sincerely hope that all of us will enjoy our time in the magnificent city of Toledo – scientifically, academically, as well as socially. It has always been a city of scholarly exchange, and our presence here is most fitting.

Jürgen Mittelstrass is the President of the Academia Europaea. This address was given at the commencement of the 19th Annual Scientific Conference of the Academia in Toledo.