

# Forum Opens for Those Approaching God as the Unknown

## Courtyard of the Gentiles Launches Dialogue With Nonbelievers

By Jesús Colina

PARIS, MARCH 25, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- The Courtyard of the Gentiles, a new forum for dialogue between believers and nonbelievers, was launched Thursday at the Paris headquarters of UNESCO, in the presence of diplomats, international officials and representatives of the world of culture.

The initiative, promoted by the Pontifical Council for Culture, takes up a suggestion of Benedict XVI to create a space for dialogue "with those to whom religion is something foreign, to whom God is unknown and who nevertheless do not want to be left merely Godless, but rather to draw near to him, albeit as the Unknown" (Benedict XVI, Dec. 21, 2009).

Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, chose the French capital to launch the forum because of its symbolic status as the home of the Enlightenment and its impact on the world.

Thus, Thursday and today, three prestigious institutions -- the U.N. Educational, Social and Cultural Organization, the University of the Sorbonne and the Institute of France -- are enabling top personalities from the world of culture to discuss the topic "Lights, Religions, Common Sense."

At UNESCO, this dialogue was presented as an "essential element in the quest for peace and abolition of the rejection of the other in the affirmation of one's own identity," explained the Pontifical Council for Culture in a communiqué.

"This dialogue has the same relevance for our time as interreligious dialogue," the council statement affirmed. "From the perspective of globalization, it calls for posing vital questions of a universal character and values."

### Taking on a challenge

The meeting began with Cardinal Ravasi's greeting and a recorded message from Irina Bokova, director-general of UNESCO, who focused the session on the subject of intercultural dialogue. This theme is of particular interest to UNESCO, having named 2010 International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures.

Several political personalities, among them Giuliano Amato, former Italian prime minister, stressed the point of view of the debate at the political, cultural and social level.

"The alliance between believers and nonbelievers will give liberty and democracy their meaning," said Amato.

Aziza Bennani, Moroccan ambassador to UNESCO, presented the decisive role that women have in society, which they are called to develop.

Henri Lopes, former prime minister of Congo, and the ambassador of that country to France and UNESCO, stressed the importance of this dialogue to promote a culture of peace in the world, beyond European and Western borders.

Pavel Fisher, former ambassador of the Czech Republic to France, emphasized the decisive character of the search for meaning in the heart of a world simultaneously secularized and religious, and he encouraged dialogue between different visions of the world and of man.

Fabrice Hadjadj, a writer and philosopher, said that there must be no fear in enlarging the frontiers of this dialogue, of posing the question on God, the question of faith.

Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche Community, spoke about the power of transformation that stems from the quality of a look directed to wounded humanity. "Encounter is more important than dialogue to establish a relationship of trust," he said.

Monsignor Francesco Follo, permanent observer of the Holy See to UNESCO, said there can be no humanism without respect for the person. The defense of this nature is the crux in the bioethics debate, he explained.

Believers and non-believers must continue to coexist, concluded Monsignor Follo, saying this is not just a question of reciprocal tolerance, but a challenge that must be assumed.

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