

# **LAUDATIO**

**ON THE OCCASION OF THE AWARDING OF THE**

**GLOBAL DIALOGUE PRIZE 2009**

**TO**

***DARIUSH SHAYEGAN***

**BY**

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**ÅRHUS CONCERT HALL**

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Distinguished laureate,  
Honourable Mayor,  
*Rector magnifice*,  
Honourable Chairman of the Poul Due Jensen Foundation,  
Esteemed guests,

We are gathered in this splendid hall in the City of Århus to honor a most remarkable person – and for a unique occasion that is meant to evoke awareness of one of the major challenges to the global order of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, namely the preservation of peace under the conditions of cultural diversity and in an increasingly averse climate of geopolitical tensions, which are nurtured by reference to that very diversity.

Today's event is special also because it is the *inauguration* of the Global Dialogue Prize. Our first laureate embodies the philosophy that underlies the aspirations of the prize – namely to encourage intercultural research and its application – in an exemplary manner. Professor Dariush Shayegan has developed a profound philosophical theory of what is nowadays debated and propagated as “dialogue of civilizations,” a term he actually coined. While reflecting upon his own intercultural experience between Asia and Europe, he has drawn conclusions that help elucidate the *conditio humana*. With his awareness of the implications of cultural diversity for our understanding of the world, he was indeed ahead of the time, and he set standards for intercultural discourse long before it had become a fashionable topic.

His biography uniquely symbolizes the dialogical nature of his philosophy. Born to a (Sunni) mother from Georgia and a (Shia) father of Azeri origin, he grew up in an environment of ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. His education and studies in Iran, England, Switzerland and France have made him a man of the “in-between,” someone who lives and thinks *between* the cultures, as he once characterized himself in an autobiographical conversation.

In the context of this laudatio, one cannot do justice to the richness of Professor Shayegan's philosophical and literary oeuvre in so many different domains such as cultural studies, anthropology, or the relation of religion and politics. Instead, we shall concentrate on the laureate's lasting contribution to the theory of civilizational identity and to his many and sustained efforts, in Iran and in Europe, in the promotion of an open discourse between intellectuals of different cultural backgrounds, with the aim of reaching a deeper

understanding not only of “the other,” but of oneself – in a manner that genuinely resembles the spirit of the *γνῶθι σεαυτόν* of ancient Greek philosophy.

Es early as in the 1970s, when he was professor of Indology and Comparative Philosophy at the University of Tehran, Dariush Shayegan devoted his efforts to the comparative study of non-Western civilizations such as those of China, Japan, India, Egypt and Iran; he was deeply convinced of the importance for these civilizations to learn from each other’s experience in their encounter with the life-world of the “West.” In 1976, he founded the Iranian Centre for the Study of Civilizations. An international conference, which he organized in 1977 in Tehran, was dedicated to one of the basic questions of inter-civilizational encounters, which touches upon the very essence of dialogue. The topic he had chosen perfectly expressed the challenge faced by all who deal with the problem of cultural identity under the conditions of globality: “Does the Impact of Western Thought Allow for the Possibility of Real Dialogue between Civilizations?”

In his opening speech at that conference, he concisely formulated the hermeneutical paradigm of inter-civilizational encounter and set the *leitmotiv* of the later discourse on a “dialogue among civilizations”: “By ‘dialogue’ we mean communication and sympathy. By ‘sympathy’ we mean acceptance. Since only by accepting the other can we remain true to ourselves.” This early quote (1977) is evidence of the complex philosophical nature of his quest for cultural identity; in many of his studies he analyzes what might be called the “dialectical process” (in the sense of the philosophy of consciousness) through which cultural self-awareness is formed in an encounter of the cultures of the “periphery” with the dominant Western civilization.

It is to be noted that two decades later, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, in his capacity as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, introduced the paradigm of “dialogue of civilizations” into the realm of international politics. At his initiative, the General Assembly of the United Nations declared 2001 as the Year of Dialogue of Civilizations. The Assembly later endorsed a project, proposed by the Prime Ministers of Turkey and Spain, for an “Alliance of Civilizations.” President Khatami also established, in the 1990s, a Centre for the Dialogue of Civilizations in Tehran.

In the meantime – exactly since the end of the bipolar world order –, the civilizational paradigm had become part of a new antagonistic discourse, which was “launched” with the publication of Samuel Huntington’s essay in the 1993 edition of the American magazine “Foreign Affairs,” entitled “The Clash of Civilizations?” (with question

mark). In clear distinction from Huntington's approach that is mainly informed by the concepts and assumptions of political science, Shayegan has developed a paradigm of civilizational dialogue that goes *beyond* the artificial notion of static civilizational worlds in the sense of entities that are perceived as interacting, whether peacefully or violently, out of a state of *isolation*. In his philosophical reflection, intercultural dialogue is not just a technical concept that belongs in the category of international relations theory. His analyses are based on inter-cultural competence of a richness and depth that is almost unmatched among contemporary intellectuals.

His upbringing in a cosmopolitan environment and his study of so many other languages in addition to Persian and French – such as Sanskrit, Arabic, Latin, Turkish, and English – enabled him to reflect on the questions of cultural identity in a *concrete* form, and not in the manner of abstract speculation. His own complex experiences with different cultural life-worlds prepared him to ask, in the course of his studies, indeed of his “voyage between the civilizations,” more *fundamental* questions, such as those that touch upon the very *authenticity* of modern intercultural approaches, upon the current notion and political doctrine of “multicultural society,” and in particular upon identity formation in an ever more complex web of civilizations that find themselves in different phases of their (internal) development, but nonetheless are destined to interact and – whether they are prepared to acknowledge it or not – to be affected by one another. It is in this context that he has studied the complex problems related to the encounter of traditional civilizations with modernity.

As early as 1968, Dariush Shayegan undertook a hermeneutical effort of intercultural research that was nurtured by a commitment to a dialogue between Islam and Hinduism. In his dissertation on *Les relations de l'Hindouisme et du Soufisme d'après le Majma al-Bahrayn de Dara Shokuh*, which he had written at the Sorbonne University with Henry Corbin as his dissertation advisor, he particularly dealt with the question of a common mystical language of both religions, a theme which he again addressed in his book on “Hinduism and Islamic Mysticism,” published in Persian language in 2003.

Of special importance for his quest for cultural identity in the era of modernity is another early book, which appeared in 1977 under the title “Asia vis-à-vis the West” (in Persian language: *Asia dar barabar-e-gharb*). There he analyzes the different paradigms of the Eastern and Western perceptions of the world and – implicitly – works out a comprehensive philosophical framework for East-West dialogue, with particular emphasis on how Asian civilizations are impacted by the development of Western thought.

The simultaneity of different life-worlds is also the point of departure of Shayegan's masterful treatment of questions of cultural identity in his book *Le regard mutilé – Schizophrénie culturelle: pays traditionnels face à la modernité*, the English edition of which has been published under the title “Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West.” He does not mince words and describes, in the book's Foreword, the “civilizational” state of affairs without any illusions: “We who were born on the periphery are living through a time of conflict between different blocs of knowledge. We are trapped in a fault-line between incompatible worlds, worlds that mutually repel and deform one another.” His intellectual honesty allows him to acknowledge “two antagonistic modes of being, two very different historical experiences,” which he nonetheless identifies as “two faces of humanity's single, common experience in the world.” His essentially philosophical, universalistic outlook enables him to avoid the confrontationist paradigm, which has become so fashionable in the post-September 11 constellation, and to evoke the “hope of a future dialogue between the inhabitants of the planet.”

Dialogue, in order to be credible and, thus, sustainable, has to be based on a realistic – or truthful – assessment of our complex social reality, which is of particular importance in view of the *differences* between the worldviews and value systems among the existing multitude of cultures and civilizations. Differences cannot be explained away by mere fiat of a (political) doctrine. In his work entitled *La lumière vient de l'Occident: le réenchantement du monde et la pensée nomade*, Shayegan convincingly refutes an approach that is based on a kind of “mathematical equalization” of cultures. Insofar as the doctrine of “multiculturalism” is based on such an assumption, it is, in Shayegan's analysis, ignorant of the multiple levels of human consciousness and deprives the human being of critical self-awareness. It needs no further explanation that he equally rejects all positions of ethnocentrism.

In clear distinction from these unidimensional and static approaches to cultural diversity, Shayegan has laid out what can be identified as the *dialogical structure* of cultural self-comprehension and self-realization. By now, his contribution to the philosophy of the cultural mind has been widely acknowledged. As aptly stated by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University, in a commentary on the book “Cultural Schizophrenia,” Shayegan “brilliantly sheds new light on [...] issues that have been superficially glossed over in much of the current literature.” “Cultural identity,” and how it is shaped in an increasingly interdependent world, is one such issue. As we know since the developments of the last decade, it has direct bearing on the future of world order.

What Shayegan characterizes as *espace de transmutation* (“space of transmutation”) among cultures is indeed one of the most important elements of global dialogue. No culture (or civilization) will remain completely unaffected by the encounter with another culture (or cultures, in the plural, as is the case under the conditions of our globalized world) – as much as it may insist on its uniqueness or paradigmatic character. Even in the case of an attitude of outright rejection of “the other,” a culture’s identity will still be shaped, or co-determined, by that very other. This also holds true, as Shayegan explained in a conversation in Paris in 2003, for all “substantialist” (or “fundamentalist”) forms of cultural self-comprehension, including the West’s self-assertion vis-à-vis the cultures of the so-called “periphery.”

The paradigm of the “clash of civilizations” is situated – almost unavoidably, one might say – in the context of such monolithic conceptions of cultural or civilizational identity. It is to the merit of Dariush Shayegan that, in an era of increasing tensions along a civilizational divide, when differences are often exploited for political purposes – whether domestic or international, and from all sides, East and West –, he has made us aware of the intrinsic mechanisms of the formation of cultural identity, enabling us to do away with substantialist illusions and dangerous stereotypes. Only awareness of those mechanisms will enable us to appreciate the alternative paradigm of “dialogue,” insofar as this requires an *open horizon of understanding* in a genuine hermeneutical sense.

With his early quest for a deeper understanding of the nature and specific role of civilizations, Professor Shayegan was well ahead of his time. His foundational work in the field of cultural identity, indeed his vision of *universal civilization*, has gained him wide international recognition. Like his philosophical mentor, Henry Corbin, he was invited to speak at the prestigious *Eranos* meeting, a philosophical discussion group dedicated to foundational issues of psychology, religion and spirituality, which has existed since 1933 and has welcomed luminaries such as Mircea Eliade, Carl Gustav Jung, Adolf Portmann, and Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki. More recently, in 2006, he was awarded the prestigious *Prix littéraire de l’Asie* of the *Association des écrivains de langue française* (ADELF) for his novel *Terre de mirages*, which offers the reader a glimpse at life in India in the 1940s and testifies to the author’s genuine appreciation of cultural diversity. It is of no surprise that Professor Shayegan has also been offered the Honorary Presidency of a special session at the IX International Ontology Congress to be held later this year in Barcelona, Spain, on the theme “Philosophy as Universal Characteristic of Man.”

The first awarding of the Global Dialogue Prize is in line with these acts of public recognition and acknowledges the laureate's outstanding contribution to the philosophy of culture. Dariush Shayegan's initial question, raised at the Tehran conference in 1977, as to the "conditions of the possibility" of dialogue has led him to a genuine intercultural exploration of the cultural mind. While his "empirical" point of departure was an analysis of his nation's – and civilization's – encounter with the "West," and the worldview of modernity represented by the latter, he has proven capable of drawing the consequences for the individual and the collective psyche in *different* cultural environments, reaching out to cultures and civilizations that have experienced a similar fate.

His conclusions, however, are not *negativistic*, but *constructive*. Profound knowledge not only of his own tradition, but also of the religious and philosophical wisdom of neighbouring and distant civilizations, has uniquely enabled him to explore the many dimensions of the cultural mind, indeed the "multiple layers of modern consciousness." His philosophical and literary oeuvre represents a most unique "East-Western Divan" for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the present historical juncture – when the world risks to be drawn into protracted conflicts over issues of cultural identity and civilizational self-assertion –, the award bestowed on Dariush Shayegan highlights and acknowledges his unique contribution to a system of cultural philosophy that allows to formulate an *alternative* paradigm of peaceful interaction and interdependence. In the name of the Award Committee, I congratulate Professor Shayegan on the Global Dialogue Prize 2009.

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