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**PHILOSOPHY OF CO-EXISTENCE
AND DIALOGUE AMONG CIVILIZATIONS**

LECTURE

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I

In the era of globalization, dialogue between different, and potentially contradicting, worldviews and value systems – as embodied in the world’s civilizations – has become *indispensable* for global peace. On the basis of philosophical awareness of the transcultural origins of our “life-world,” the encounter of cultures and civilizations* gains new significance as element of world order. Particularly in large multicultural states or groupings of states (such as the African Union or the European Union), inter-cultural dialogue has become an essential element of *social cohesion* and *political stability*.

In view of the unequal power balance at the global level (whether in military, economic, political or social terms), it is important to emphasize that *credible* and *sustainable* dialogue among cultures and civilizations can only be achieved on the basis of mutual respect, which means the acceptance of *equality* of all cultures in the normative sense. Accordingly, cultural hermeneutics requires a non-discriminatory approach by which cultures and civilizations, though not factually identical, are treated as manifestations of the same universal spirit of humanity.

Dialogue is a basic feature of intellectual awareness of the human being, individually as well as collectively. It is realized in a *comprehensive* and *multidimensional* framework and can in no way be insulated from the realities of the life-world (including the specific political and socio-economic conditions under which it is conducted). At the same time, dialogue will not be *credible* – and will not succeed in terms of *realpolitik* – if *one* side tries to exploit the supremacy it may enjoy at a given moment in history in the economic, social, or military domain.

In regard to global order, there exists a complex relationship, indeed *interdependence*, between dialogue and peaceful co-existence, which the philosophy of civilization, and in particular philosophical hermeneutics, must be aware of:

- a. On the one hand, dialogue of civilizations is a basic *requirement* for global peace and stability. It may contribute to a world order that is perceived as *just* by the peoples of the world.

* For the purposes of this lecture, we use the term “civilization” as a general notion under which “culture” is subsumed as specific notion.

- b. On the other hand, a just and balanced world order is a fundamental prerequisite of *dialogue* since an encounter among civilizations does not happen in a political and socio-economic vacuum.

The “interactive circle of dialogue,” as we would like to call this interdependent relationship, does not result from, nor is it indicative of, a logical contradiction. It is structurally similar to the interdependence in the act of human understanding (*Verstehen*), which Gadamer, in his seminal work “Truth and Method,” described as the “hermeneutic circle.” Cultural hermeneutics must pay attention to this interdependence.

When, during the 1990s, a “clash of civilizations” was first identified as major threat to global order, almost everyone, including that paradigm’s foremost exponent, Samuel Huntington, affirmed a commitment to dialogue as basis of lasting peace among nations. This, albeit superficial, consensus has manifested itself in the contemporary global discourse on peaceful co-existence in the form of many solemn proclamations, diplomatic initiatives, summit conferences, etc. – all dedicated to that noble goal which no one dares to reject. The quasi-global consensus found its political expression in the United Nations General Assembly’s proclamation of 2001 as the “Year of Dialogue among Civilizations” and in the establishment (in 2005) of the so-called “Alliance of Civilizations” upon the joint initiative of the Prime Ministers of Spain and Turkey.

In the majority of cases, however, the preconditions for effective and meaningful dialogue were simply ignored in the conduct of international realpolitik. This is where the *philosophy of dialogue* comes into play – as *reflection* of and *corrective* against the instrumentalization of civilizational and cultural differences for ulterior purposes, often connected to the assertion of power and national interests.

I shall briefly try to identify the *principles* and *requirements* that have to be acknowledged if “dialogue of civilizations” is to become a sustainable feature of international relations:

1. Equality of civilizational (cultural) life-worlds, including value systems, in the *normative* sense: This excludes any form of patronizing attitudes on the part of one civilization (culture) towards another. “Sovereign equality,” one thus might

say, is not only an attribute of states as subjects of international law, but also a principle that reflects a people's inalienable right to civilizational and cultural identity.

2. Awareness of the “dialectics” of cultural self-comprehension and self-realization: A civilization (culture) can only fully comprehend itself, and thus realize its identity, if it is able to relate to “the other” in the sense of an *independent* expression of *distinct* worldviews and value systems, which are not merely an offspring of one's particular (inherited) civilization. The process of civilizational or cultural self-realization is structurally similar to how the individual achieves self-awareness: reflexion (derived from the Latin term *re-flexio*) implies that the subject looks at itself from an *outside* perspective, making itself the object of perception (“subject-object dialectic”). As has been explained in the philosophy of mind, particularly since Fichte and Kant, individual self-awareness is the synthesis that results from a dialectical process in which the *ego* defines itself (in the sense of *definitio*: drawing the border) in relation to “the other.” This also applies to the collective self-awareness of a civilization or culture. Only if a civilization is able and willing to see itself through the eyes of “the other,” will it achieve a status of *maturity* (in the sense of its *internal* development). Only this will allow it to overcome the fear of the “other” as the “alien” and, thus, to take part in a global interaction with other civilizations.

3. Acknowledgment of meta-norms as foundation of dialogue: Derived from the normative equality of civilizations, these norms at the meta-level are logically prior to *material* norms and have to be subscribed to by all partners in any meaningful undertaking of dialogue. “Tolerance” and “mutuality” (mutual respect) are two such examples of meta-norms. They can be understood as *formal* values that make interaction between civilizations at all possible. As such, these norms are non-negotiable; they are the “enabling conditions” (*Möglichkeitsbedingungen*) of any process through which an individual civilization realizes its specific, i. e. materially distinct, value system. Due to their general (formal) nature as quasi-transcendental preconditions in the Kantian sense, they cannot be attributed to just one particular civilization; their status is obviously *universal*, i.e. *trans-cultural*.

4. Ability to transcend the hermeneutical circle of civilizational self-affirmation: In order to be able to position itself as a genuine participant in the

global interaction among cultures and civilizations, a given civilizational or cultural community must go beyond what Hans-Georg Gadamer described as *Wirkungsgeschichte* (“Reception History”). By this term, he refers to the exclusive influence of the respective community’s “autochthonous” traditions on the formation of socio-cultural identity. In view of its impact on global order in the last century, reference to *Eurocentrism* as basic feature of “the West’s” collective identity formation can most pertinently illustrate this hermeneutical dilemma. Over hundreds of years, nations of the Western civilization had been accustomed to propagate their worldview, value system and lifestyle vis-à-vis “the rest” of the world, a process that was often accompanied by a strategy to *reshape* – or redefine – the identity of those other cultures and civilizations. Against this background, international cultural exchanges have all too often been mere self-encounters – or “civilizational *soliloquia*” – of a dominant actor. However, any civilization will only be able to fully understand itself, and define its place in the global realm of ideas, if it is willing and able to engage meaningfully with perceptions of the world that have developed *independently* of itself, i.e. that have not already been shaped by that particular civilization. This is the essence of the *dialectics* of civilizational self-comprehension or self-definition. If we again follow the Latin etymology of the term, *de-finitio* means the ability to see what is *beyond* the (civilizational) border, and to understand one’s own civilization or culture *with regard* to the other, while at the same time preserving – and developing more fully – the integrity of one’s own position.

II

According to the four principles and requirements of self-comprehension and self-realization I have just outlined, a *philosophy of dialogue* may help to understand the ever more complex realities of civilizational and cultural diversity, at the global as well as at the regional and domestic levels. It is imperative that politics acknowledge the existing multitude of civilizations and cultures and adopt a set of clearly defined rules that ensure respect of the *right to diversity* on the basis of *mutuality*. Any rejection of this principle (the right to diversity) is a recipe for conflict and may threaten the stability of political order and, in the long term, even the very survival of a polity.

The time for measures to ensure, or reestablish, a “monocultural reality” has long passed – and particularly so in the countries of Europe that, though inadvertently, triggered a multicultural development first through colonization and, later, through the globalization of the economy (the latter in tandem with the United States). The cultural dynamic these historical processes have activated cannot suddenly be stopped or “switched off,” just as the process of industrialization cannot be reversed for the sake of a nostalgic revival of a pre-modern encounter with nature.

Responsible politics should create the organizational framework in which distinct – and often (not only geographically) distant – cultural and civilizational identities can develop and interact *without* threatening the stability of the global system, and without alienating a country from the rest of the world. The simultaneity of distinct civilizations, each in a different phase of identity formation, and at the same place, in the same πόλις [polis], is an existential challenge from which decision-makers cannot escape lest they be “punished by history.” This is also the challenge of *multiculturalism* Europe is faced with, at the beginning of the 21st century.

Those who engage in the *rhetoric* and *politics* of a peaceful co-existence and partnership among civilizations – certainly the vast majority of UN member states, and especially those assembled in the “Alliance of Civilizations” – should be reminded of the philosophical principles of dialogue which do not allow a policy of “civilizational double standards.” *Equality* of civilizational expressions necessitates *mutual recognition*. What states claim for themselves (in terms of national sovereignty), they must also be prepared to accord to each other. The application of the *reciprocity principle* to issues of collective identity means that states should abstain from any claim of civilizational supremacy or hegemony. All too often in history, and in particular since the time of Europe’s “Holy Alliance” (in the 19th century), powerful states used issues of civilization to legitimize so-called “humanitarian interventions,” in fact wars of aggression. Thus, a policy of global dialogue – whether within or outside the United Nations – should incorporate the principle of reciprocity in order to be credible and sustainable.

The multicultural reality, which has become a *fait accompli* in many polities that so far defined themselves in the tradition of the nation-state, has plunged many

states into a deep identity crisis. Unless the new reality is also acknowledged at the global level, the world will enter an era of perpetual confrontation along civilizational lines. Accordingly, those who promote the goal of dialogue *internationally* can only do so credibly, and consistently, if they recognize the equal rights of cultural and religious minorities *in their own countries*. In our era of global interdependence, “peace at home” and “peace in the world” are intrinsically linked.

Monocultural nostalgia should thus give way to *intercultural openness* and *civilizational curiosity*, which alone will ensure a polity’s long-term viability and success (including economic competitiveness) under conditions of an ever more complex interdependence between culturally diverse communities at the local, regional and global levels. According to the earlier described dialectics of self-comprehension, this does not in any way exclude the assertion of a distinct national identity.

Respect for each other’s value system is rooted in fundamental *human rights* (individual as well as collective), which the community of nations has solemnly confirmed on repeated occasions since 1948. As we said at the beginning, the values of freedom and tolerance, expressing the essence of human dignity, are norms on the basis of *mutuality*. They are the precondition for the enjoyment of distinct and specific social and cultural rights by the multitude of cultures and civilizations that make up today’s world. As such, they are universal. Furthermore, as rightly stated by the participants of the 2001 Conference on the Dialogue of Civilizations in Kyoto, in order to develop a *global ethos* – as basis for peaceful co-existence – “it is necessary to reach consensus on which norms are universal and which norms are cultural and specific.”**

According to our approach, the practice of civilizational dialogue must be *comprehensive* (in regard to its global outreach towards *all* civilizations) and *inclusive* at the same time (in so far as it integrates the economic, social and political levels). This requires that no one civilization try to establish itself as global “standard-bearer.” Similarly, the earlier-mentioned Kyoto Dialogue also stressed the need to “carefully containing attempts at ‘globalizing’ the specific value systems of those currently in power politically or economically.” In this regard, the Conference

** United Nations University in cooperation with UNESCO, *International Conference on the Dialogue of Civilizations. Tokyo and Kyoto, 31 July – 3 August 2001*. Conference Report, Par. 32, p. 8.

called for a “respectful dialogue between members of different civilizations,” emphasizing that “no judgment should be made about the norms of other cultures unless one has first critically examined similar norms within one’s own culture.”

Conclusion

By its very nature, dialogue – as quest for mutual understanding and co-existence – is nurtured by an attitude of *openness* towards different expressions of humanity, synchronically as well as diachronically. In all historical periods, mankind has developed and expressed itself in a variety of life-worlds and “horizons of knowledge” – a process that continues and accelerates in our time, commonly referred to as the global era. Unlike as proclaimed by an apologist of Western supremacy, the “end of history” (Francis Fukuyama) has not yet come. No one civilization, whether from East or West, North or South, can claim to be paradigmatic. The dialogue of civilizations remains an open-ended project.

In the nuclear age, there is no alternative to co-existence among cultures and civilizations that accept each other as equals. Dialogue has become a condition of collective survival.
