The dialogue of civilizations: Philosophical basis, current state and prospects

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Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War, the "dialogue of civilizations" has become one
of the keywords in the global discourse on issues of world order and peace.
Traditional enemy stereotypes along the ideological lines of the earlier East-
West conflict have disappeared while new confrontational schemes are
becoming visible under the slogan of a supposed "clash of civilizations."

  The nature of dialogue consists in the ability to see oneself from the
perspective of the other. The human being's consciousness – self-reflection – is
only possible if the subject is aware of the other, i.e. of that which is not the
self, that from which it can distinguish itself. Semantically, this is the essence of
the Latin word *definitio*. Applied to the level of civilization, this entails that full
understanding and development of any given civilization can only be achieved
if the respective civilizational community not only takes note of, but positively
interacts with other civilizations on the basis of (normative) *equality*. Thus, the
"dialogue of civilizations" is the fundamental requirement for defining each
civilization's identity and for reaching its maturity and universal relevance.

  The common values underlying all civilizations – making possible genuine
civilizational progress – are those of *tolerance* and *mutual respect*. Acceptance
and realization of those values is the necessary, though not the only condition
for the adequate self-comprehension and identity of a civilization. In this
regard, an analogy can be drawn between (a) the normative equality of
civilizations on the socio-cultural level and (b) the concept of the sovereign
equality of states on the political level.

  One of the most serious threats to international peace and stability, i.e. to the
realization of the basic goals of the United Nations Organization, is the
persistence – or even creation in certain cases – of enemy stereotypes along
civilizational lines. Over the centuries, the demonization or vilification of
another civilization (particularly in regard to religious identity) has often been
a prelude to armed conflict and has served to create a pretext for – or to
legitimize – the violent pursuit of mainly economic interests. At the beginning
of the third millennium, the world should not repeat the mistakes of an earlier
era. No civilization should try to establish hegemony over the other. The claim

to civilizational superiority has too often been a recipe for confrontation, even armed conflict.

The dialectical structure of self-consciousness

The inner logic of self-consciousness of the human being helps to explain the very nature of dialogue among civilizations: reflexion (consciousness) in the sense of critical awareness of myself is only possible if and to the extent in which I know the other, his/her way of life, value system, etc. The identity of the mature person is shaped on the basis of the encounter with the "other," that which is different of myself (whether in a personal or non-personal form). As explained in the great tradition of the philosophy of the human mind, the subject can only become aware of itself in distinction from an object, that which is not identical with itself.

What is true on the abstract and general level of self-consciousness of the individual, is also true – i.e. applicable – on the level of the collective subject. The community (whether in the form of peoples, national or ethnic or religious communities, etc.) develops its identity through complex interaction with other communities. In addition to this dialectical relationship of self-comprehension on the individual and group level, there exists an interdependence of individual and collective consciousness within each community.

The philosophical nature of dialogue

The *conditio sine qua* non for defining a national, ethnic, cultural, or religious community is to relate it, i.e. compare it to other such communities.[1] The very existence and, at the same time, acceptance of the "other" – in this case in the collective, social, or communitarian sense – is the basic precondition for the shaping of the cultural, social, and ethnic identity of any given community – and of the unique identity (personality) of the individuals belonging to the respective community.

Cultures and – more generally – civilizations mutually depend upon each other in order to fully develop their identity and to reach a status of maturity and relevance on a global scale.[2] In conclusion: tolerance is a basic precondition for the development – and advancement – of a civilization, it is the fundamental value shared by all genuine civilizations.

It is the specific task of the philosophy of civilization to analyze and explain the structural relationship between the subject-object dialectic of self-consciousness and the actual requirements of inter-civilizational dialogue.[3]

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[1] See the author's earlier conception in: *Cultural-philosophical Aspects of International Cooperation*. Lecture held before the Royal Scientific Society, Amman-Jordan (1974). Studies in International Relations, II. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1978.
[2] See Hans Koechler (ed.), *Cultural Self-comprehension of Nations*. Tübingen: Erdmann, 1978.
[3] For more details see the author's paper: "The Clash of Civilizations Revisited," in: Hans Koechler and Gudrun Grabher (eds.), *Civilizations – Conflict or Dialogue?* Studies in International Relations, XXIV. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1999, pp. 15–24.

The multicultural realities in the context of globality

The application of this philosophical truth to the multicultural realities in the current environment of globalization is a challenging task for all those who are concerned about civilizational dialogue:

As a result of the globalized information and communication structures, a large number of civilizational entities exist simultaneously and are increasingly becoming aware of one another. The basic question faced by those who are concerned about an international order of peaceful co-existence at the beginning of the third millennium is: how can conflict be avoided, how can Samuel Huntington's paradigm of a "clash of civilizations" be prevented from becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy?

First and foremost, each civilization should accept, for itself, the basic fact of other civilizations existing simultaneously with all their different value systems, beliefs, social habits, etc. This "fact of diversity" should be interiorized by each civilization and should not be seen as a threat, but as a chance for further developing and enriching the identity and awareness of one's own civilization.

In this regard, responsible leadership is required on the part of the major representatives and opinion leaders in their distinct civilizational environments.

As a result of the socio-economic and political facts of globality, the simultaneous existence of a variety of civilizational and cultural communities is becoming increasingly obvious. There is simply no viable alternative to the maxim of a peaceful co-existence among civilizations. The principle of normative (not factual) equality and mutual respect is indispensable. The only alternative would be Huntington's "clash" – or war – of civilizations.

Accepting the need for co-existence as basic norm for the very preservation of peace in the context of globalization and recognizing this norm as a value that is to be shared by all civilizational groups irrespective of their own specific value systems, will only be a first, but essential step towards the development of a comprehensive philosophical framework and of a positive social attitude towards a genuine dialogue among civilizations.

The relationship between civilizational awareness on the one hand (accepting the existence of the other as basic precondition for one's own identity) and the complex interaction with other civilizations on the level of equality on the other hand has become ever more important since the tragic events of September 11, 2001 in the United States of America. One may state without exaggeration that *dialogue on the level of civilizations* has become indispensable for the preservation of peace on a global scale.[4]

Civilizational awareness and the search for one's identity must not be seen in the narrow context of self-assertion; such an attitude would inevitably lead to the creation and/or strengthening of social stereotypes. The self-comprehension of a civilization and the appreciation of its values have to be embedded in an inter-civilizational framework of mutual exchange. Civilizations that

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[4] See the summary of the author's paper: "After September 11, 2001: Clash of Civilizations or Dialogue?", In: *Forum. Popular na pahayag ng malayang komunidad* (Universidad ng Pilipinas), Manila, Tomo 3, Blg. 3, 28 March 2002, p. 9.

aspire to be present in the global framework of today have to accept the fact of interdependence.

In this context, one may distinguish *two basic paradigms*: (a) that of mere "subsistence," i.e. existence in a self-contained mode (without any aspiration towards interaction and positive self-assertion resulting from it), versus (b) that of co-existence as partner in a universal, truly global exchange of ideas and dialogue about the basic insights gained and the values propagated by each civilization on an equal level.

The basic level of civilizational value systems and the meta-level of the value system of civilizational dialogue

A dynamic relationship exists between the diversity of social, cultural, and religious value systems in an ever more globalized world on the one hand and the consensus on a common system of values that results from the necessity to co-exist (the alternative to which would be perpetual conflict) on the other hand. The exclusiveness a civilization may eventually attribute to its particular value system cannot be justified with the argument of diversity. Such an attitude will inevitably lead to conflicts with other civilizations.

The fundamental ethical principle of mutuality (mutual recognition) comes here into play. In order to be consistent in one's claiming the right of being accepted (tolerated) by the other on an equal level, one has to accord – or concede – that very right to the other. This normative principle (that may also be defined in the tradition of Kantian ethics) has the status of a meta-norm. It is at the roots of the philosophy of "peaceful co-existence among civilizations." This philosophical awareness may be the first step towards a comprehensive and lasting, i.e. sustainable process of civilizational dialogue.

The diversity of normative systems related to the various civilizational and cultural formations requires the consensus on the basic norm of tolerance as common denominator between all civilizations.

A civilization puts itself outside of this context if it rejects the basic truth that each normative system, related to whichever civilization, can only claim a legitimate right to recognition if it respects the universal norm of mutual acceptance. Instead of being embedded in the common "civilizational space" of mankind, such a civilizational community will find itself on the road to permanent conflict with other civilizations. In the present context of economic globalization, this would be a rather contradictory state of affairs.

Should one of the major civilizations choose to define itself in an exclusionary manner – which is nearly always connected with the assertion of superiority – and should it thus put itself outside the context of dialogue, the world may well see a protracted *cold war between civilizations* – after the Cold War of ideologies and power blocs has ended more than a decade ago. This new form of "cold war" may well turn into real war – particularly when acts of violence are given a religious dimension, thus potentially triggering a sequence of events that may elude political rationality and traditional crisis management between governments.

In the present global constellation – where a unipolar political order is juxtaposed with socio-cultural multipolarity and related conflict situations on a large scale – there exists the real danger of a replacement of the horizontal scheme of dialogue by the vertical scheme of exclusion. The latter, whether we like it or not, implies a kind of "civilizational anarchy" (with all the "clashes," frictions and conflicts that this entails) that is similar to the often referred to "anarchy between sovereign states" that has been typical for an international system in which state sovereignty is defined as an absolute value. Traditionally, this doctrine has been in conflict with that of the peaceful co-existence among nations.

This analogy is derived from the rather long experience of the Cold War and the United Nations' interpretation and application, until recently, of the principle of sovereign equality of states. The comparison makes drastically obvious what is at stake in the present global discourse on the *status of civilizations and world peace*. Traditionally, international relations have been defined by reference to state interests as decisive factor of the interaction between states – whereby the avoidance of conflict was not perceived as a value in itself, but as a necessary requirement for self-preservation.

The present "New World Order"[5] is characterized by an unequal power balance that results, as far as the socio-cultural consequences are concerned, in an increasing alienation between the Western-industrialized and the developing world. The undeniable tensions between the Western and Muslim world are a vivid expression of this imbalance. This situation creates feelings of being threatened on both sides of the cultural or civilizational divide: there exists fear for the preservation of one's identity and independence on the one side, and fear for the loss of one's dominant role and the preservation of one's way of life, system of values, etc. on the other side. It is exactly here where the stereotype of a threat supposedly emanating from the respective "other" civilization comes into play.

If civilizations are allowed to become a divisive factor in the global interplay of forces, the reality of international relations will be that of prolonged conflict, at times even open war; whereas, if and when civilizations define themselves on the level of global interaction among each other, they may be the driving force behind the peaceful settlement of otherwise (politically) intractable disputes or conflicts. In this sense, the issue of civilizations is not merely of abstract philosophical interest, but of utmost political importance. The now fashionable doctrine of the clash of civilizations must not be allowed to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This danger is particularly acute since the tragic events of September 11, 2001.

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[5] See the author's paper: *Democracy and the New World Order*. Studies in International Relations, XIX. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1993.

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