

## Dialogue between East and West

Text of an address by Muhammad Khatami, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran and President of the Islamic Conference Organization, to the European University Institute, Florence, on 10 March 1999.

Attending an academic gathering has always been a pleasant and enjoyable exercise for me. For in such gatherings, the proceedings most often revolve around three functions: talking, listening and understanding. Understanding results from talking and listening, and the two functions of talking and listening,, combined with looking, constitute the most important physical, psychological and spiritual activity of a human being. What is gained by looking expands one's realm of knowledge and also consolidates the consciousness of one's own presence, the feeling that I exist.

While we talk with others and listen to others, looking takes place from one's home base; from the base labeled 'I', and the world and man belong to the domain of sight, and are subjects of what I can see. But talking and listening combine to make up a bipartite–sometimes multipartite–effort to approach the truth and to reach a mutual understanding.

That is why dialogue has nothing to do with the skeptics and is not a property of those who think they are the sole proprietors of Truth. It rather reveals its beautiful but covered face only to those wayfarers who are bound on their journey of discovery hand in hand with other human beings.

The phrase, dialogue among civilizations and cultures, which should be interpreted as conversing with other civilizations and cultures, is based upon such a definition of truth, and this definition is not necessarily at odds with the well–known definitions of truth that one finds in philosophical texts.

Dialogue among civilizations requires listening to and hearing from other civilizations and cultures, and the importance of listening to others is by no means less than talking to others. It may be in fact more important.

Talking and listening create a conversation; one side addresses the other side, and speech is exchanged. Under what circumstances is man addressed? In other words, in what kind of a world is he

or she' addressed? The world of science is not the world of speeches and addresses—science is a conscious effort to discover the relationship of objects, and for this reason, scientific discourse does not transcend the level of man's self-consciousness.

But the world of art and the world of religion are the world of addressing. We are addressed by a work of art, and in religion, words of God address man. That is why the languages of mysticism and religion are linked together by genuine and profound ties, and why the earliest specimens of art that have been created by man are also specimens of Sacred Art. Man is addressed again and again in the Bible and in the Holy Qur'an, and it is with this call that the individual human being is elevated and becomes a person.

Etymologically speaking, the word 'person' is related to *persona*, the mask that actors would put on their face in the theatre. But= the important point here is that in the concept of religious address, when man is being addressed by God on a general and universal level, and not in specific terms of religious teaching and codes of conduct, none of his psychological, social or historical aspects are really being addressed. What is addressed is man's true, non-historic and individual nature, and that is why all the divine religions are not quintessentially different. The differences arise from religious laws and codes of conduct that govern the social and judicial life of human beings.

Now we must ask ourselves who is this person that is being addressed.

From the earliest times, philosophers have devoted a major part of their time and energy to answering this question. They have tried to explain how, and in what manner we may get to know man, to know him inside out, in absolute terms. The question of how one can get to know him or her; and reach the goal of self-knowledge, constitutes a major part of this philosophical quest.

Recounting the fascinating story of philosophical anthropology, and the episodes dealing with self-knowledge and self-discovery, would take several long nights in the thousand and One Nights of the history of philosophy. Some of these tales were first told in the East and some originated in the West. It is significant to note that the Eastern tales explain the Oriental side of man's being while the Western tales reveal the properties of his Occidental side.

Man is in fact the meeting point of the soul's East and the reason's West. Denying the existence of any part of his essence would impair our understanding of the significance of his being. In our effort to grasp the meaning of the person, we should watch out not to fall into the trap of individualism, or into that of collectivism.

Even though the views expressed by Christian thinkers have helped the modern concept of the individual to crystallize, this should not be taken to mean that there exists a natural link between the two views. Just as the profound attention focused on the meaning of the person as the recipient of the Divine Word should not be credited, in my view, to the influence of personalism.

Of course, it has been said by everyone that in modern society, it is individual human beings who are the criterion and the yardstick for all institutions, laws and social relations, and that civil rights and human rights are in fact nothing other than the rights of this same individual. On the other hand, collectivism, which was launched vis-à-vis individualism, was formulated by multiplying the same concept of the individual, and therefore the two ideologies have the same philosophical foundation.

For this reason we consider, from our position of spiritual wisdom, the antagonism between individualistic liberalism and collectivist socialism to be superficial and incidental. The concept of the person can be easily explained in terms of Islamic mysticism. The Islamic mystics consider man to be a world unto him, a microcosm. Man's originality does not emanate from his individuality or his collectivity. His originality is solely due to the fact that it is him, and him alone, who are addressed by the Divine Call. With this address, man's soul transcends its boundaries, and with the transcendence of his soul, his world also becomes a world of justice and humanity.

Anyone who examines even briefly the meandering course of philosophy from its beginnings to the present will clearly notice

The continuous swing of the philosophers, from one extreme to the other. The last swing, the last link in the chain, is modernity. This word, which seemingly is the latest term to be derived from the Latin *modernus*, was apparently first used in the nineteenth century. But the Latin word itself has been in use for more than fifteen centuries, and it was only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that modernity was applied to a wide range of concepts in such diverse fields as philosophy, art, science, history and ethics.

The common denominator in all these concepts is the cataclysm that shook the very foundations of man's existence and thinking towards the end of the Middle Ages. It was a cataclysm that pushed man and the world into a new orbit. Man and the contemporary world (so far as it is affected by man's ideas) result from this modern orbit into which they were sent in the aftermath of the Middle Ages. This new orbit was labelled 'modern' in those times, but today we call it the Renaissance. Italy played a decisive role in the birth of the Renaissance. Although many books and essays have been written to describe and explain this great milestone, there is still a definite need for philosophers, historians and scientists to think and talk about it.

The sole aim of the Renaissance was not to revive classical Greek culture. Its principal aim was—as already pointed out by a number of thinkers—to revitalize religion by giving it a new language and fresh ideas. The Renaissance defined the man of religion not as someone who would contemptuously turn his back on the world in order to repress it, but as somebody who would face the world. The Renaissance man of religion turns to the world just as the world awaits him with open arms, and this reciprocal openness and opening up of the world and man constitutes the most fundamental point about the Renaissance, and inherently it is a religious event aimed at conserving, reforming and propagating

religion, and not opposed to it or against it.

But this great event ended up, in due course, somewhere diametrically opposed to the original intention. The opening of the world was transformed into violent conquest and subjugation. This violent conquest did not remain limited to mastering nature. Its fires soon spread to human communities. What came to be known in the socio-political history of Europe, as colonialism is the result of extending the domineering attitude of man towards nature and the natural sciences, to men

Modernity without adopting a humanitarian and ethical approach. The critique of modernity that I propose is undertaken from a vantage point and angle which is profoundly different from the position of its well-known critics, especially in the domain of philosophy. Someone who sets out to prune a tree should not cut the very branch he is standing on. That is exactly how some of the philosophers of our time are behaving in their critique of modernity.

By denying Reason any dialectical authority, they turn it either into a weapon that destroys everyone and everything, itself included, or transform it into a blunt and rusted sword that can only become a museum piece. One cannot use Reason as a critical weapon without accepting its authority and without recognizing its limits.

The critique of pure reason, which opened a new chapter in Western philosophy and may be taken to mean the critique of everything and all concepts including pure reason itself, only becomes possible if reason is endowed with authority. Without the authority of reason—which should be discussed at length and with precision in some other venue and at a more appropriate time, without forgetting to discuss its relationship to domination and power—it will not be possible to have a clear picture and concept of such vital political issues as human rights, peace, justice and freedom.

And without this clear concept, our efforts for the establishment of these ideals will not succeed. But this should not be interpreted as a call to rationality and European style logo centrism that proceeded post-modernism. Because of the fact that Europe has given birth to modern rationality, it should feel a stronger responsibility for criticizing it and finding a solution to prevent its destructive consequences.

Europe has itself fallen prey to its over-reliance on rationality, and is today engaged, through its thinkers and philosophers, in totally discrediting its own rationality. The Orient, which etymologically speaking has given rise to a number of words pertaining to order and a sense of direction, can undertake in, the course of a historical dialogue with the West aimed at reaching a mutual understanding, to call on Europe and America to exercise more equilibrium, serenity, and contemplation in their conduct, thus contributing to the establishment of peace, security and justice in the world. This sense of equilibrium and serenity, if it is taken in the Oriental

Age of Enlightenment was an Apollonian era, while Romanticism was the movement of the pendulum in

the opposite direction. The next century should be a century for turning to the kind of spirituality that Oriental man has pursued for several thousands of years.

The exuberance and vitality of European culture stems from its critical approach towards everything, it included. But the time has come for Europe to take another step forward and view itself differently, as others see it. This should not be taken to mean that Europe should forget its great cultural heritage or that it should turn to a new type of obscurantism. It is rather an encouragement to European culture and civilization to embark on new experiences to gain a more precise knowledge of global cultural geography.

In Orientalism, we find that the East is treated as an object of study, rather than as 'the other side' of a dialogue. For a real dialogue among civilizations to take place, it is imperative that the East should become a real participant in the discussions and not just remain an object of study.

This is a very important step that Europe and America need to take towards the realization of the 'dialogue-among-civilizations' project. Of course this is not a one-way invitation. We too, as Iranians, as Muslims and as Asians, need to take major steps towards gaining a true knowledge of the West, as it really is. This knowledge will help us to improve our economic and social way of life. Taking such bold steps by us and by Europeans would require a character trait that was first recognized and promoted in Europe by the Italians.

Renaissance historians have written that as a result of the continuous contacts of the Italians with Byzantium and the, Islamic world, the people of Italy developed a sense of tolerance. The Italians had been familiar with Islamic civilization since the time of the Crusades, and they admired it. This knowledge and familiarity with a foreign culture, and the sense of wonder that accompanied it, was the biggest factor in developing this sense of tolerance among the Italian people.

It is ironic that this concept of tolerance that was adopted from the Muslims and is a result of the contacts made by Europeans with them, is now, in our time, being offered by Europeans to Muslims as an ethical and political piece of advice. Evidence of the Muslim influence in the creation of this spirit of tolerance among Europeans is clear and can be traced in Europe's literary history. A very well known play by the German dramatist Lessing entitled 'Nathan the Wise', which is itself based on an Italian work called 'One Hundred Old Tales' (*Cento Novelle Antiche*) is a case in point.

But the influence of Muslim thought and culture on Italian and European culture is not limited to the question of tolerance. No nation has the right to confiscate the contributions of others to its own civilization, and to deny the share of any civilization in the history of human culture. Apart from the influence of Muslim philosophy, theology and art on Europeans, something that has been very instrumental in refreshing and purifying the temper of Europeans is Islamic literature, in all its diversity and richness. As an example, one can cite the influence of Ibn al-Arabi upon Dante, but here fortunately

much has been said and written by well-known European scholars.

Speaking of the historical past without any reference to the future would be an idle academic exercise, whereas it is imperative upon us, for the sake of helping human communities and improving the state of the world, to find out how the relations of Asian countries, and especially those of the Muslim countries, with Europe stand today.

Why? Because Muslims and Europeans are next-door neighbors, and nations, unlike individuals, cannot choose their neighbors. Therefore, apart from moral, cultural and humanitarian reasons, Islam and Europe must, by force of historic and geographical circumstance, get to know one another better, and then move on to improve their political, economic and cultural relations. Our futures are inseparable because our pasts have been inseparable.

Even today, in our schools of philosophy, the views of Plato, Aristotle; and Plotinus, and those of Descartes, Kant, Hegel and Wittgenstein from among the modernists are taught alongside the views of al-Kindi, Farabi, Ibn Sina (*Avicenna*), Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra. If the great civilizations of Asia view themselves today in a Western mirror and get to know one another through the West, it was Islam that served in the *not-too-distant* past as a mirror to the West; it was a mirror in which the West could see its own past and its own philosophical and cultural heritage.

If dialogue is not a simple choice but a necessity for our two cultures, then this dialogue should be; conducted with the true representatives of Islamic culture and thought. Otherwise, what good will it do for the West to talk with a few 'Westoxicated' types who are themselves no more than inferior and deformed images of the West. This would not be a dialogue; it would not even amount to a monologue.

A profound, thoughtful and precise dialogue with Islamic civilization would be helpful in finding fair and practical solutions to some of the grave problems that beset the world today. The crisis of the family, the crisis in the relationship of man and nature, the ethical crisis that has developed in scientific research, and many more problems of this nature should be among the items on the agenda of an Islamic European dialogue.

Dialogue is such a desirable thing, because it is based on freedom and free will. In a dialogue, no idea can be imposed on the other side. In a dialogue, one should respect the independent identity of the other side and his or her independent ideological and cultural integrity. Only in such a case, can dialogue be a preliminary step leading to peace, security and justice.

In the meanwhile, conducting a dialogue with Iran has its own advantages. Iran is a door-to-door neighbor with Europe on one side, and with Asia on the other. Thus Iran is the meeting point of Eastern and Western cultures, just as man is the meeting point of the soul's East and the reason's West. The Persian heart and the Persian mind are brimful with a sense of balance, affection and tolerance, and for this reason, Iranians are the advocates of dialogue and adherents to justice and peace.

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