

Dialogue and the New Millennium

Text of an address delivered by President Muhammad Khatami to the annual session of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), on 29 October 1999.

It gives me great pleasure to be speaking here at UNESCO, in your presence, on a major cultural and political issue of our time. This issue is bound to have an important bearing on the life of future generations, purging it from ugly influences, while adorning it with morality, spirituality, and beauty.

I fully recognize that excessive optimism about the immediate outcome of the proposed dialogue among cultures and civilizations can be inhibiting and discouraging, as equally can be an exaggerated sense of pessimism under the current circumstances of the world on the one hand, and the obstacles facing the proposal on the other. Obviously, we have to be fully aware of the long, rough, and trying journey that lies ahead.

Simultaneously, we should be cognizant of the prospects for the materialization of this proposal, which would have a permanent effect on the political and epoch-making events in man's future life. The fact that this proposal has been unanimously welcomed in both international circles and specifically, in the Fifty-Third United Nations General Assembly, besides being hailed by intellectuals and the public alike, is in itself of great significance.

We certainly know that people around the world are not ready to heed any and every call they hear. There are many instances, which can be enumerated to elucidate the point. In the past, when some benevolent persons, some thinkers, or some revolutionaries either to renew their covenant or to help establish a new society on the basis of ancient human ideals invited people in some corners of the world, they did not conform. However, it was only at one particular juncture where people responded positively to this invitation: the call to dialogue among civilizations.

It stands in no doubt that the elucidation of the reasons for this event on the basis of the accepted social and political doctrines or on current philosophical views is not feasible. Based on this concept and in the hope of finding an answer to the question as to why the proposal for the dialogue among civilizations,

first presented by the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Fifty-Third General Assembly, was so well received, we are compelled to focus on some implicit factors prevalent in human communication, apart from political considerations and issues of national interest.

The concept of dialogue among civilizations may be interpreted in different ways and at various levels. Delving into the meaning of dialogue can be a good starting point for discussion. This will naturally lead us into the realms of philosophy and history, which will require us to separate the semantic and the philosophical aspects of dialogue. In addition, we will have to take into account the opinions of the greatest authorities on the subject.

This is not naturally the place or the time for such an exposition; however, we are impelled to briefly touch on a few points related to the term dialogue. Assuming that the philosophical and theoretical meanings of dialogue are clear, we suggest that the term in question has been both denotatively and connotatively applied. When we call on the world to engage in dialogue, both senses are applied.

Thus meetings held to discuss different questions and points of view are instances of a true dialogue, – while all cultural, artistic, scientific, and literary endeavors may be regarded as instances of a connotative mode of dialogue. This division is not merely literary or rhetorical, because when we set out to scrutinize the denotative meaning of dialogue, we are required to enter certain domains where the connotative mode becomes inapplicable.

The phrase 'dialogue among cultures and civilizations' embodies certain characteristics that may apparently be conflicting and even contradictory. Dialogue is as old as human culture and civilization on the one hand, and something novel on the other – The resolution of this dichotomy should not be difficult if we are to take the phrase, on the surface, as a factual statement which would fit in as the definition of dialogue that has endured through time.

Moreover, considering the factual statement of dialogue among civilizations as an approach will require the definitions of 'culture', 'civilization', and 'man' to be framed in such a way that they do not clash with the very essence of dialogue.

This would mean our paying special attention to the collective aspect of man's existence, emphasizing the vast and infinite range of human civilization, and especially, stressing the point that no major culture or civilization has evolved in isolation. In other words, only those segments of cultures and civilizations have survived that have been endowed with the 'power of communication' which involves 'speaking' and 'listening'.

Therefore, dialogue among cultures and civilizations entails both speaking and listening. Listening is a virtue, which should be cultivated, and is not found easily in everyone. To acquire it one has to embark on a course of rigorous training designed to enrich one's morality and intellectual capacity. Listening is not a passive activity. It is an active engagement where the listener is exposed to the world created,

discovered, or experienced by the speaker. Without active listening, the whole dialogue is doomed to failure.

In order to understand the meaning of the phrase 'dialogue among civilizations' in a prescriptive manner, one has no choice but to pay close attention to a number of points, one of which is the relationship between a politician and an artist, the other being the relationship between ethics and politics. What kind of relationship exists between a great statesman and a skillful artist?

The divergence between the two seems obvious because they deal with different fields of human endeavor. But what entices them to get together, and in which aspects can they be compared? If –we forego the simple aphorism that explains politics, the practice of exercising certain types of diplomatic finesse in political relations, to be an art in itself, we may then be able to safely discern a more profound relationship between a politician and an artist.

Although there are a number of definitions in the philosophy of art for this concept, and we may choose to accept any one of them, we cannot ignore the fact that an artist is a person capable of living in 'the present', and that he or she can also transform this present into an 'eternity'. Creating this eternity of the present for the sake of presenting the concept of the time 'when' and 'at which time', the artist is able to create a work of art, and we, as members of the target audience, are drawn to it as the enchanted spectators in its presence.

This is regarded as the magic touch of an artist, and only great artists are capable of achieving such a status. The historical fate of an artwork is painted in perpetuity. We are also cognizant of the fact that the historical fate of nations is shaped at certain junctures by great statesmen.

I hope these words will not remind you of some old controversies, such as the argument about the influence of 'personalities' on history, because I have no intention of entering into any discussion of this sort. We can only pose such a question about the role of personalities in history when we can separate the individual aspects of man from the collective aspects of his being. Now we know that such a distinction is arbitrary, no matter who makes it.

Therefore, on the basis of the foregoing point, we may state that the common trait between statesmen and artists is nothing other than 'creativity'. When it comes to creativity, repetition and imitation are meaningless. Furthermore, the full manifestation of creativity in a person depends on his or her 'tenacity'.

A great artist tackles the artistic truth with creativity and tenacity, and a great statesman, likewise, tackles the fundamental and vital problems of his country with the same tenacity, resoluteness, and creativity.

Today politicians can take a long stride towards the creation of a better future, which are more just, more humane, and more beautiful, for their countries and for the world by helping the realization of the

proposal for the dialogue among civilizations.

Another point that I would like to discuss here is the relationship between ethics and politics vis-à-vis dialogue among cultures. Much has been said about the relationship of ethics and politics on a theoretical level, but what concerns us here is paying adequate attention to the ethical aspects of the proposal for a dialogue among civilizations. A basic change in political ethics is required for the realization of the proposal. Modesty, commitment, and involvement are three important ethical requisites for the crystallization of the proposal in the domains of politics and international relations.

The other significant point about the dialogue among civilizations is that the term 'dialogue' is used here in a very narrow and strict sense; it is different from such concepts as cultural interaction, cultural interchange, and cultural domination. Many factors, including wars, may bring about cultural and scientific cooperation, or result in one culture influencing another. And similarly, the domination of one form of culture and civilization over its rivals has sometimes taken place through overt aggression, and in our time, with the help of communication technology.

But dialogue becomes possible only at a particular time and place under certain psychological, philosophical, and ethical conditions, and therefore, not everybody, with any world view and belief in some political, moral, religious or philosophical system, can claim that he or she is an advocate of dialogue.

For real dialogue to take place, we require a set of general, all-inclusive, a priori axioms, without which no dialogue is possible in the true sense of the word. It is up to such world organizations as UNESCO to conduct research into these axioms, to publicize them, and to make them acceptable and even desirable to the world community.

These axioms and the original proposal for dialogue among civilizations are not compatible with the dogmas of positivism and modernism, and they are not in so much agreement with the extreme skepticism of the post modernists either. Therefore, one of the duties of the advocates of the theory of dialogue among cultures and civilizations is to refine the philosophical and intellectual core of the theory.

This refinement paves the way for the emancipation of the theory from any dogmatism hostile to the pursuit of truth and from the excessive cynicism afflicting post-modernist thinkers, who, heedless of the terrible pain and suffering of thousands of human beings, regard any call for the pursuit of justice and relief from oppression as a sort of 'meta-discourse', with no philosophical justification or explanation.

Another precondition for the dialogue among civilizations is tolerance. Even though tolerance is something necessary for the early stages of the realization of the dialogue, we should be careful to distinguish between negative tolerance and positive cooperation. The former is a modern concept and the latter is a proposal put forward by Eastern religions and philosophies. For dialogue to become

universally accepted as a new paradigm, it must be able to elevate its level from negative tolerance to positive mass cooperation.

Any Muslim who is familiar with the Holy Qur'an will be reminded of the divine call to mass participation in humanitarian activities as soon as he or she hears the word 'cooperation' in the verse '...And cooperate in goodness and piety...'. All human beings are entitled to participate in the activities that will shape the world in the third millennium. No nation should be left on the sidelines because of some philosophical, political, or economic argument. It is not enough to tolerate others, but one must work with others.

The human world should be shaped by the massive cooperation of all human beings.. Though this notion up to the early twentieth century sounded like a humanist motto, today it is a necessity for the continuation of human life.

This cooperation is not merely of an economic and political nature. In order to bring the hearts of human beings closer together, we must also think of ways to bridge the gap between people's minds. One cannot be very hopeful of this prospective union of hearts by believing in conflicting philosophical, moral, and religious foundations.

To bring hearts together, it is necessary for minds to be brought closer together, and this will not be achieved unless great thinkers of the world make a special effort to understand the main concepts in the thoughts of others and then to communicate these to their own people. It is necessary to talk about the basic concepts related to the heart and to the mind; everyone should express what they think of the meaning of life, the meaning of happiness, and the meaning of death. This may not yield any immediate results, but without it, any agreement reached merely on political and economic grounds will prove to be very fragile and short-lived.

The twentieth century, which is unparalleled in all history for the ferocity of its many wars and for its countless instances of oppression and exploitation, has been a joint product of the ideas of philosophers and the acts of statesmen. It would not be possible to put an end to the bloody and terrifying events of the century without a basic change in political thinking and also without changing the present state of international relations, replacing it with a new paradigm such as the dialogue among cultures and civilizations.

Religious faith, which is nothing other than giving an affirmative answer to the divine call from the bottom of one's heart, should not be considered as something unchangeable, and lacking dynamism. Also, our understanding and interpretation of religion should not be at odds with the spirit of faith, because such a disparity will be an obstacle in the way of dialogue among religions, which is itself the first step in the realization of any viable peace.

Just as we get our daily bread and water from the earth, we should be able to get our daily share of fresh and lively faith from heaven. Faith should flow like a river in order to exist; there can be little hope for a stagnant swamp. Faith can only bear the fruits of morality and peace when it is constantly flowing. It is with an ever-renewing stream of faith that one can love the world and one's fellow men.

The other point as to the relationship, between peace and dialogue is that there is only one special form of peace which relates to dialogue. The so-called *Pax Romana*, which is also known as 'hegemonic peace', is something that requires 'power' and 'law' as its guarantors.

The viability of such a peace depends on the amount of force behind it and whether the peace in question serves the interests of either party, whereas a peace attained through dialogue and the rational maturity of human beings will depend on its own *raison d'être* as well as on the rational and psychological development of man. As retrogression is almost impossible in rational development, such a peace will definitely be long-term, with a very broad range, covering such fields as peace among cultures, peace among religions, peace among civilizations, and also peace between man and nature.

Today, creating a lasting peace between man and nature should be a top priority. The very old relationship between man and nature, in which man loved nature, benefited from her bounty and found solace in her proximity, has been replaced simply by the exploitation and destruction of nature. In the course of thousands of years stretching from prehistoric times to the modern era, never has man looked at nature simply as a 'source of energy'.

This does not mean that man has not benefited from the earth and its gifts, has not been engaged with it to develop his social and civil life, and has not been making a moderate number of changes in his natural surroundings in order to adapt himself to nature and to adapt nature to his needs. Of course he has been doing all these, but never before has nature been reduced to such a state of 'sheer objectiveness'.

In all traditions and cultures and among all the ethnic groups and nations of the world, there have existed a number of old rituals, which were performed at certain times and in certain places that coincided with natural events. But what came to be known as *entzauberung* or 'disenchantment' in the modern era has not only destroyed the old rituals and man's relationship with nature, but has also created a situation in which man no longer regards the world and its contents as a meaningful, purposeful, and organic whole.

Man is no longer in 'communion' with nature; the sea, the mountains, the forests and the deserts are now simply a mass of inert materials with different shapes. This rupture of intimate and ardent relations with nature has led to a weakening of similar relations among men. The dialogue among cultures and civilizations, which should be concerned with the most important and urgent problems that afflict all mankind, should naturally place the problem of man's relations with nature at the top of its agenda.

The prescribed understanding of dialogue among cultures and civilizations will lead to a lively discussion of present-day global issues. Today, man yearns for justice, peace, freedom and security, just as he has always yearned for them. Dialogue among civilizations needs peace to be realized, and once realized, it will help to sustain peace.

In talking of dialogue as a prerequisite for peace, we mean a kind of dialogue, which is different from diplomatic negotiation. It is a well-known fact that throughout history, there have been many occasions when wars and negotiations have existed side by side.

By dialogue, we do not mean here the use of diplomatic language to promote one's political and economic interests and to bring about victory over the enemy, and in short to continue the war in another form. Dialogue among civilizations cannot take place without sympathy and affection, and without a genuine effort to understand others without the desire to vanquish them.

Some people may think that the dialogue among cultures and civilizations will eventually bring about disorder and entropy in the world. It cannot be denied that this is a possibility. But first of all, it is possible to reduce the speed and intensity of such an eventuality to the minimum through the hope of sound education and training.

Secondly, we should remember that entropy, whether we like it or not, is an inevitable problem which occurs in the course of man's existence. The option for death and cultural degeneration and disintegration is no better than the option for life and cultural vitality. And it is an option, which will have its share of disorder and hardship.

The theory of dialogue among civilizations will not develop without conducting a comprehensive study into the roots of wars and conflicts. Such a study of conflicts cannot be undertaken in isolation and without taking into account the present state of the world. Wars often have deep psychological roots in the study of which psychologists, social psychologists, and psychoanalysts have long been engaged.

However, they break out due to political and economic factors as well. With the terrible gap between the rich and the poor in various communities and countries of the world, how can we naively call for peace and mutual understanding? How can we call for dialogue if this inequality persists and if no fundamental steps are taken to help the deprived peoples of the world? When on the eve of the third millennium, thirty percent of the world's population will live in abject poverty, how can we talk of peace and security and forget justice?

Even if the West decides to save its life and forget the fate of the people in the rest of the world, it is obliged to help others in order to protect its own security. For a number of social, political and technical reasons, all the people living in today's world find themselves aboard the same ship.

Riding out the storms and reaching the safety of the shore will be either for all the passengers or for none. This statement may sound a little exaggerated today, but tomorrow it will become easier to understand. On the threshold of the third millennium, the destiny of our world is common for all. For this destiny to be a just and happy one, the only course of action is a dialogue among various cultures and civilizations.

We should remember that although in the twentieth century the sword held sway, and some people won and others lost with each sweep of its blade, the next century should revolve around dialogue. Otherwise, this sword will reemerge as a two-edged weapon that will spare no one, and it is quite possible that the mighty warmongers will be among its first victims.

Thank you and God bless you all.

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