

# The importance of dialogue between civilizations for international relations\*\*

by Prof. Dr. DDr. h.c. Hans Köchler



Hans Köchler  
(picture of)

*Today it is important that we look beyond our garden fence and try to understand the different lifestyles, worldviews and value systems of the peoples of our international community, and see this diversity as an opportunity to de-*

*velop our own point of view. Although this may seem idealistic in view of recent events, we could also say that cultural hermeneutics, especially in the era of globalization, has acquired an eminent political significance that reaches beyond the traditional concerns of the educated middle class.*

The *Alliance of Civilizations* is an initiative of now 139 member states of the United Nations. When one looks at the name, those states obviously seek more than mere dialogue, namely a kind of union of civilizations. When it comes to states, and not individuals or groups of civil society, one must, however, always raise the question as to what concrete aim, and on the basis of what ulterior motives, such an alliance has been forged for – and if need be, against whom or what. This is quite justified, because among the 139 states that have officially declared themselves “Friends of the Alliance of Civilizations” many are actively involved in armed conflicts – which are often wars with civilizational undertones.

## “Actually, this is not ...”

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<sup>6</sup> Grande Nation, Charles Liebherr, 29.4.2015

[www.chli.paris/2015/04/29/frankreich-erhoeht-militaerbudget-um-10-prozent-nach-den-attentaten/](http://www.chli.paris/2015/04/29/frankreich-erhoeht-militaerbudget-um-10-prozent-nach-den-attentaten/)

<sup>7</sup> *Manager Magazin*, 17.11.2015, Frankreich

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<sup>8</sup> Mother Jones, 18.11.2015, Weapons Companies’ Stock Surge after Paris Attacks. [www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/11/weapons-company-stock-rally-paris-attacks-isis](http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/11/weapons-company-stock-rally-paris-attacks-isis)

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<sup>9</sup> Mother Jones, loc. cit.

“My point with these remarks is to scrutinize the very approach to dialogue in the context of contemporary politics. In that regard, I see myself in the tradition of Dr Annemarie Buchholz-Kaiser who unequivocally pointed to the multi-polar structure of today’s world and stressed the resulting need to reach an understanding beyond ideological boundaries. In her article in *Current Concerns*, No. 28 of 18 September 2013 she wrote: ‘Let us join hands whatever our worldview may be.’ This is the immediate problem we are facing; what we are experiencing here and now is a serious failure, indeed a shambles, of the international policy of dialogue.”

With regard to politics, it is by now a generally accepted fact that – since the not yet fully explained events of 2001 – the formula “dialogue of civilizations” has become the epitome of global “political correctness”. The phrase has already been used in global discourse in the year 2000 – that is before the events of 2001 – by the then President of Iran, *Mohammad Khatami*. On his instigation, the UN subsequently decided that 2001 should be the “United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations.”

Given the political monopolization of this formula by virtually all sides and parties in the global interplay of forces, a philosophical examination seems appropriate.

Very briefly I would like to touch on the history of the term – from the time before it became a buzzword in world politics. I developed the dialogue paradigm and the related philosophical concepts more or less in the period of the Cold War. In the early 1970s – precisely in 1972, when we were about to found the *International Progress Organization* – I gave a lecture at Innsbruck University on the question, “How can peace be secured in an era of ideological confrontation between communism and capitalism?” This was the time of the East-West conflict. My conclusion then was that peace can only be permanently secured on the basis of a genuine dialogue between the various cultural and civilizational identities. In this year (1972) I wrote a letter to the Division of Philosophy of UNESCO and suggested that the organization attend to the subject of a “dialogue between civilizations” as a basis of world peace. Unfortunately, the time for the idea had not yet come; the political environment was simply not conducive to the pursuit of such a goal – and our initiative did not trigger anything at the political level. This, as we

know now, happened only a quarter of a century later.

I cannot speak here in detail about the philosophical principles of dialogue among civilizations. However, I would like to give brief a historical hint before I address the current constellation: Back then, when we launched the concept in the early 70s, we also organized a conference on the cultural identity of peoples. Since the world cultural organization of the UN had responded positively to our initiative, it eventually happened in cooperation with UNESCO in 1974. It is worthy of note that at the time at least one international statesman, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, *Kurt Waldheim*, understood the importance of the paradigm of dialogue among civilizations and cultures also at the political level. In a special message, addressed the participants of our conference in Innsbruck, he said: “There is no future for mankind unless tolerance and understanding between cultures and nations become the rule rather than the exception.”

My point with these remarks is to scrutinize the very approach to dialogue in the context of contemporary politics. In that regard, I see myself in the tradition of *Dr Annemarie Buchholz-Kaiser* who unequivocally pointed to the multi-polar structure of today’s world and stressed the resulting need to reach an understanding beyond ideological boundaries. In her article in *Current Concerns*, No. 28 of 18 September 2013 she wrote: “Let us join hands whatever our worldview may be.” This is the immediate problem we are facing; what we are experiencing here and now is a serious failure, indeed a shambles, of the international policy of dialogue.

Two circumstances characterize the current situation:

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*First:* Armed conflicts – despite all the protestations of the powerful – continue to be waged with undiminished force. An example is the confrontation, with strong ideological undertones, between the Muslim and Western world, which is again escalating dangerously. This is most obvious in what is happening in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Mali, Nigeria and other countries and regions. There is not only the ideological confrontation "Islam – Western world," but also an intensifying intra-Islamic theological conflict between Shiite and Sunni Islam, and also between different factions within the Sunni community concerning the interpretation of the doctrine. Furthermore, it should be noted that new ideological divides between East and West are emerging even in Europe, as is evident in the Ukraine conflict. It is a regrettable fact that war is still considered as a means for settling disputes. In this respect, the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, banning any threat or use of force between states, have not been implemented yet.

*Secondly,* it should be noted: Unlike perhaps as in earlier epochs, technological and economic development today does not allow a precise separation of the international (intergovernmental) and national dimension any longer. The so-called "clash of civilizations", as Huntington called it, does not only occur at both levels; there is also an interdependence between the national and international level. This, for instance, is becoming obvious in the increasing number of disputes in the context of multiculturalism in Europe. They cannot be separated from the conflicts in the Middle East, in which European states have interfered directly or indirectly in recent years. As early as in 2011, at the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring – or "Arab Revolt," to use a more neutral term – I warned against interference from outside. I have said this in various Turkish newspapers. However, as we know today, the state chancelleries did not heed my ad-

vice, and now we are faced with the consequences.

A chain of events has been set in motion the consequences of which make the proponents of a dialogue of civilizations appear helpless, if not totally untrustworthy. The question arises whether we are dealing here with – as the Americans would say – "unintended consequences" of political and military interference, or whether long-term considerations of power politics are behind these developments.

In the present situation, the crucial question is the following: How can one, when gathering in beautiful Bali in Indonesia [site of a UN conference in August 2014] in order to talk about the Alliance of Civilizations and the promotion of dialogue, pursue such noble objectives by brute force, i. e. a policy of armed intervention aimed at "régime change" in foreign countries?

The protagonists of world politics who have officially devoted themselves to dialogue have actually created a political climate that brought about a new era of crusade-like conflicts – however one may evaluate this personally. One could refer here, inter alia, to the ongoing interventions in Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003), Libya (2011) and Syria (since the beginning of the year 2011 as well). Looking at these cases of armed intervention, one cannot avoid being skeptical of all the idealistic rhetoric.

Furthermore, it has become a regrettable fact that repeated Western interventions in the Muslim world have led to a situation in which the survival of the indigenous Christian communities throughout all of the Middle East – and especially in Syria and Iraq – is no longer to be taken for granted. This is an issue to which the Western media should pay much more attention. In this regard, I notice the total helplessness of the global political establishment vis-à-vis the so-called Islamic state, and especially the phenomenon of "Caliphate proclamations" (e.g. for an area that includes large parts of Iraq and Syria, as well as in Nigeria).

One should also mention here to the utter geostrategic confusion in the face of the disintegration of the political order that was imposed on the region of the Middle East in the wake of World War I. It is no coincidence that those who speak for the "Islamic State" have grandly declared that the emergence of this entity is about to trigger the end of "Sykes-Picot", the secret agreement concluded in 1916 between a diplomat from Britain and his counterpart from France, which established the boundaries in this region against the will and without the consultation of the peoples concerned. In our era that has seen the proclamation of a "dialogue of civilizations," one is, thus, well advised to investigate the political and historical causes behind these developments.

I would like to make the following three points:

*First,* despite all assurances to the contrary, the political actors denied to each other even the most basic respect. In particular, the Western world for decades, and especially since the end of the Cold War, aimed to shape the Eastern – and specifically the Muslim – world in its own image. It is now absolutely crucial to analyze the situation as rationally as possible and sine ira et studio [without hate and zealotry, i.e. absolutely factually] because emotional convictions will not get us anywhere. One has to face the historical truth. In the case of Iraq, we should realize that initially the citizens of this country were subjected to a cruel and comprehensive policy of sanctions, which lasted more than ten years (from 1990 on) and caused the death of up to one million people, and that subsequently – after the 2003 war of aggression – the Sunnis in Iraq were systematically marginalized and humiliated; one might also say they were delivered to the revenge of their enemies. How – I would like to ask here – was then British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who converted to Catholicism, able to reconcile such a genocidal policy with his conscience – he who, as a public figure, used to emphasize the value of religion and morality in his speeches?

The developments in Syria and Iraq – with the emergence of a new entity (the so-called Islamic State) of which I do not know how it will consolidate and how long it will exist – did not come out of the blue. It happened against a particular historical and social background. In relations between collectives, the law of action and reaction has always applied throughout history.

*Second point:* The political reorganization in accordance with the vision of the so-called Greater Middle East was primarily pursued by violent means. These

## An addendum to the climate conference

Of course we have to take care of our beautiful Earth and naturally of its atmosphere. It is the respect for life and our care for our children that makes such a claim self-evident. It is also apparent to everyone that we look for new sources of energy and that we must promote their use, if only because the energies that we are using today are finite. Even the skeptics, who doubt that we humans can control the global warming or the cooling of the earth at all, let alone the exact degree, will not object to that, espe-

cially since such a reorientation definitely makes sense economically.

What I miss in the Final Declaration of Paris is the demand to end all wars immediately. In my view this request has to come first, especially if you – apart from the endless human suffering – consider how much energy is wasted with every bomb that destroys our world; and that is certainly not CO<sub>2</sub>-neutral.

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included sanctions and outright armed intervention, but also – as integral part of this strategy – patronizing and ideological indoctrination of a population that was seen as to be proselytized or re-educated according to our Western notions of democracy and freedom.

*Third point:* As already indicated, this policy resulted — in a growing alienation of the Muslim population in Europe and in a casting of doubts – on both sides – on what is commonly referred to as “multi-culturalism.” After all, this is the “shambles” of which I spoke earlier.

Consequently, the propagation of a dialogue of civilizations remains mere lip service if this project is not embedded in an overall peaceful policy of co-existence, including the renunciation of proselytizing and ideological patronizing. In this context, I do not understand “proselytizing” in a theological, but in a political and ideological sense, similar to how the leading global power has acted so far. What I say here applies, of course, to both sides, not only to the West.

By now, the civilizational and cultural fault-lines appear everywhere, not only in European societies, but also in the Arab world – and there they appear with greater sharpness than we could ever have imagined. This has become evident, for example, in the developments in Egypt the details of which I cannot elaborate here, and of course in Syria, Iraq and Libya.

In terms of world politics, this means that all of us – not only the people in the Middle East – will have to face a long period of instability. We will also have to recognize that the dream of “splendid isolation” – here, in our Europe, just north of the Mediterranean – has come to an end with the mass migration from the South, triggered mainly by the interventionist policies of the West.

*In conclusion:* Quid nunc? – What now? For short-term symptom cures it is simply too late. Air strikes are indeed convenient for the West (by the way also a cowardly approach), but they are mostly inefficient, even counterproductive. The damage has already been done.

Given the chaos caused among others by the West, and given the popular feeling of insecurity and the loss of confidence in the political system in the Middle East as well as in Europe, a strategic reconsideration of politics, and in particular of the political relevance of the dialogue of civilizations, is necessary. This must include a return to the paradigm – i.e. the fundamental concept – of dialogue in the contemporary system of interstate relations.

I refer here to only a few aspects, which one should bear in mind:

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“Under the prevailing conditions, the implementation of an agenda of ‘dialogue’ or ‘alliance’ of civilizations can only mean:

1. To refrain from trying to set the other right, i.e. not to claim moral superiority, looking down at the other as target of one’s “educational” mission in the name of civilization.
  2. Non-interference, not only in military but also in ideological terms (including metaphysical worldviews). This also means to refrain from self-righteousness of any kind.
  3. Civilizational reasoning should have no place in the pursuit of concrete policy objectives. The real, especially economic, interests behind political action are to be made transparent. That would mean that the global play for power and influence does not hide behind false ideological motives. Plain and simple: when politics is about oil, it should be openly stated; when it is about the interests of an ally (see US policy in the Middle East), it should also be said so openly, and the public should be spared hollow references to the noble principles of freedom and democracy.
  4. In the maintenance of international peace and security, states should refrain from unilateral use of force and only adopt measures of collective security within the framework of the United Nations Organization. The alternative would be a protracted conflict of the type of medieval religious wars, a “war of the worlds,” so to speak, which, in the age of weapons of mass destruction, may inadvertently take on an apocalyptic dimension.”
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Dialogue is incompatible with the ethos – of course, one may also say: pathos – of missionary work, both on the Islamic and the Western secular or Christian side. If dialogue is to be more than mere talk, mere conversation, one will have to consider the rational element of human action – and here specifically not only of individual, but also of collective human action. It is about the particular “logos” of a civilization or religious worldview, namely its systemic structure. As the human being is a *zoon lógon échon*, it is quite legitimate, one might also say rational, to aim at a structural comparison between different worldviews. That is the only way to understand them, and it is the only way to comprehend what we ourselves believe or propagate.

The political leaders should actually be able to understand and appreciate that one’s own worldview cannot entirely be reduced to the other without some spiritual or cultural loss. This means, on the other hand, that one cannot exclusively assess the other view with one’s own standards. The spiritual claim to absolute validity of a *Weltanschauung* must never be politically exploited. A clear line has to be drawn between the spheres. Accordingly, it should at least be possible to analyze the now emerging ideological conflict situations in a philosophical and rational way. One might thus come to the conclu-

sion that mutually exclusive explanations of the world, contradictory doctrines of salvation, can only preserve their integrity – and, consequently, ensure their survival and international acceptance – if they agree on a policy of peaceful co-existence based on the principle of reciprocity. In the case of an eschatological doctrine of salvation (e.g. “Islamic State”) this may be mere (survival) tactics. However, for the global community of nations it is better than nothing. It will not guarantee a high-minded dialogue on metaphysical and ontological principles, but it may allow a more or less stable peace.

I would like to refer here briefly to some historical examples:

I said earlier that we are currently faced with a crusade-like atmosphere between Islam and the West. In this connection it may be of interest – even though the historical context was completely different – that in the era of the Crusades there were singular great personalities who made an effort to enter into a conversation with the other side, even though this did not mean that they would have been prepared to question their own eschatological or metaphysical conceptions. Just one example of what might be possible across ideological borders on the basis of reciprocity and coexistence, and partly also of phi-

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losophy: *Charlemagne* – at the turn of the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> century – was quite capable of maintaining friendly relations with the Abbasids in Baghdad.

One could also refer to an example from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, with specific philosophical implications: Though this was difficult to understand for many of his contemporaries, *Frederick II*, King of Sicily and Jerusalem, displayed sincere, philosophically inspired openness towards Islamic culture and philosophy and even sought the advice of Muslim scholars – and this despite of his participation in the Crusades. In the context of medieval realpolitik, arrangements between leaders on both sides were quite possible, but this did not mean that one would have tried to proselytize the other. That is, I believe, even now the decisive factor: one at least has to make an effort to understand the other position and – on this rational basis – to elaborate the principles of peaceful coexistence (as we also know them from another political constellation in 20th century Europe).

For a more distant future we may perhaps hope that both the Islamic and Western civilizations remember their common roots in classical antiquity, namely Greek philosophy. Although this is often overlooked, those who received a humanistic education with Latin and ancient Greek will understand my point. Both civilizations in their heyday – Islam in the era of the Abbasids in Baghdad and later of the Emirate of Cordoba and Granada in An-

dalusia, Europe in the subsequent Renaissance – developed their respective worldview in the terminology of Greek philosophy, especially the metaphysics and ontology of Aristotle, using Greek notions to work out the conceptual structure of their respective systems. In the Middle Ages, European science and philosophy were widely under the influence of Arab-Islamic thinking, especially in Spain, that was itself strongly based on classical Greek scholarship. I cannot go into details here about the influence of Islamic thinkers and researchers on some of the great Doctors of the Church.

This historical reminiscence may appear somewhat nostalgic – in view of what happened in later centuries and the situation we are faced with today; however, such a review may make us aware of what could also be possible.

The objectives of dialogue and a stable order of peace cannot be achieved at all if people – as still seems to be the case in global politics – engage in a denial of reality and only pay lip service to the formulas of tolerance and mutual understanding, without creating the necessary conditions for their realization. These noble goals will remain empty phrases as long as there is no precise political strategy that defines:

- a) what is to be achieved with these objectives, and
  - b) how they can actually be implemented.
- This is what the political leaders in the "Alliance of Civilizations" should commit themselves to.

Under the prevailing conditions, the implementation of an agenda of "dia-

logue" or "alliance" of civilizations can only mean:

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