Dialogue among Civilizations in the Global Era*

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Principles and Requirements of Dialogue

In our 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. In conceptual terms, we understand “civilization” as a general notion under which “culture” is subsumed as specific manifestation, both being related to the human being’s perception of the world (“life-world”) as such. In this sense, a civilization may have distinct cultural expressions in different historical periods and within a variety of linguistic, ethnic and political settings.

In our global era, the encounter of cultures and civilizations – on the basis of a transcultural philosophical awareness of the origins of our “life-world” – has gained new significance as an element of world order. Particularly in large multicultural states or groupings of states, cultural dialogue has become an essential element of social and political cohesion and stability.

In view of the unequal international power balance (whether in military, economic, political or social terms), it is of special importance to highlight a basic principle of a credible and sustainable dialogue among cultures and civilizations, namely that dialogue can only be conducted on an equal level. Accordingly, cultural hermeneutics (the interpretation of cultures) must be based on a non-discriminatory approach according to which cultures and civilizations, though not factually identical, are treated as manifestations of the same universal spirit of humanity. This is also in line with Yoshiko Nomura’s vision of “education for human

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2 For the distinction between “culture” and “civilization” see also Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” in: Foreign Affairs, Vol. 72/3 (Summer 1993), p. 24.


restoration,” which means that each individual, in an unceasing mutual effort of self-
education, eventually expands the “circle of solidarity” towards the global level.⁵

Dialogue is a basic feature of the human being’s self-realization, individually as well as
collectively. It must thus be seen in a comprehensive and multidimensional framework and can in
no way be abstracted from the very realities of the life-world (including its political and
socio-economic dimensions). At the same time, dialogue will not be credible – and will not
succeed in terms of realpolitik – if one party 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,
which the philosophy of civilization, and in particular philosophical hermeneutics, has to be
aware of:

   (a) on the one hand, the dialogue of civilizations is a basic requirement for
global peace and stability because it contributes to the building of a just
world order, i.e. a world order perceived as just by the world’s peoples;

   (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 one might describe 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 Hans-Georg
Gadamer in his “Truth and Method” described as the “hermeneutic circle.”⁶ Any form of
cultural or civilizational 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 the paradigm’s foremost exponent, Samuel
Huntington,⁷ affirmed a commitment to dialogue, not confrontation, as basis of lasting peace
among nations. This, albeit superficial, consensus has manifested itself in the contemporary
global discourse on dialogue in the form of solemn proclamations, diplomatic initiatives,

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⁵ Yoshiko Nomura, My Vision for Lifelong Integrated Education. Nomura Center for Lifelong Integrated
⁷ “The Clash of Civilizations?,” in: Foreign Affairs, Vol. 72, No. 3, Summer 1993, pp. 22-49; and The Clash of
summit conferences, etc. – all dedicated to that noble goal which no one dares to object. It
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. 8

In the majority of cases, however, the conditions of the co-operative relationship on
which dialogue has to be based in order to be effective and meaningful, were overlooked in
the political realm. This is where the philosophy of dialogue comes into play – as a reflection of
and corrective against the instrumentalization of civilizational and cultural differences for
ulterior (political) purposes. At the beginning of the 21st century, this has become all the more
urgent since force is increasingly being used in the name of universal civilizational values (such
as democracy, human rights and rule of law) 9 and the “clash of civilizations” seems to have
become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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

(1) Equality of civilizational (cultural) “lifeworlds,” including value systems, in the
normative (not descriptive) 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 entities of international law, but also a
principle that can be used to describe the inalienable right to civilizational and
cultural identity.

(2) Awareness of the “dialectics” (i.e. interdependent nature) 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, i.e.
perceptions of the world, 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 human being achieves self-awareness: re-

8 For details see: Alliance of Civilizations: Report of the High-level Group, 13 November 2006. New York:
9 For a critique see Hans Köchler, “Civilization as Instrument of World Order? The Role of the Civilizational
Paradigm in the Absence of Balance of Power,” in: Fred Dallmayr, M. Akif Kayapinar, Ismail Yaylaci (eds.),
Civilizations and World Order: Geopolitics and Cultural Difference. Foreword by Ahmet Davutoğlu. (Series
flexio (reflexion) implies that the subject looks at itself from an outside perspective, making it the very object of perception (“subject-object dialectic”). As has been explained in the philosophy of mind, particularly since Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Immanuel Kant, individual self-awareness is the synthesis in a dialectical process in which the ego defines (or realizes) itself in relation to “the other.” The same applies to the collective self-awareness of a civilization (or culture). Only if a particular 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, not in regard to external evaluation!) that eventually allows it to overcome the fear of the other as “the alien” and, thus, to take part in global interaction (“dialogue”) with other civilizations. This collective self-realization is also where the Nomura notion of “mutual education,” based on self-education, comes into play.

(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 any material norms and have to be subscribed to by all partners in a meaningful undertaking of dialogue. “Tolerance” and “mutuality” (mutual respect) are two such examples of meta-norms; they are to be understood as formal (as distinct from material) values that determine the interaction between civilizations in general and, as such, are non-negotiable. They are the very “conditions of possibility” (Möglichkeitsbedingungen in the Kantian sense) of any such process, enabling an individual civilization to realize 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. As “unchanging values,” their status is obviously trans-cultural and transcends the realitivity of time and place.

(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 has to go beyond what Hans-Georg Gadamer described as *Wirkungsgeschichte* (“Reception History,” referring to the exclusive impact of the respective community’s “autochthonous” traditions on the formation of socio-cultural identity).\(^\text{13}\) In view of the lasting impact on global order, 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 has often been accompanied by a strategy to reshape the very identity of those other cultures and civilizations.\(^\text{14}\) Against this background, international cultural exchanges have all too often been mere self-encounters of the dominant actor. However, a civilization will only be able to fully understand itself and define its place in the global realm of ideas, if it is able to reach out to worldviews that have developed *independently* of it, namely those that have not already been shaped by that civilization. This is indeed the essence of the *dialectics* of civilizational self-comprehension or self-definition; it 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 very integrity of one’s position.

**Political Implications at the Domestic and International Level**

A *philosophy of dialogue* according to the four principles and requirements of self-comprehension and self-realization we have outlined above, may help politics to manage the ever more complex realities of civilizational and cultural diversity – at the global as well as at the regional and domestic level. 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 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 (a state).

\(^{13}\) See his work *Wahrheit und Methode*, fn. 4.
The time for measures to ensure, or reestablish, a “ monocultural reality ” has long passed – and not only for Europe, which has itself triggered a “multicultural development,” first through colonization and, later, through an economically-driven immigration policy and, in tandem with industrialized countries on other continents, through the globalization of the economy. 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 the nostalgic revival of a pre-modern encounter with nature. What can and should be done, however, is to develop a new, self-critical approach towards technology – a spiritual attitude that frees us from the enslavement in our own artifacts, and an awareness of the unchanging values shared by all human beings and all civilizations.

Responsible politics has to 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 respective 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 global polis, is an existential challenge from which decision-makers cannot escape lest they will be “punished by history,” if we may allude here to a dictum of former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. The emergence of the “Islamic State” on the territory of Syria and Iraq (and beyond) is dramatic evidence of this challenge to which the international community has no answer yet.

Those who engage in the rhetoric and politics of peaceful 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 requires more than mere lip service to equal rights; it necessitates mutual recognition. What a state claims for itself (in terms of national sovereignty), it also has to be prepared to accord to the other. The application of the reciprocity principle to issues of communal identity means that states have to abstain from any claim to civilizational supremacy or hegemony. In order to be credible and sustainable, the politics of global dialogue – within and outside the United Nations – have to incorporate these principles.

The multicultural reality, which has become a fait accompli in many polities that used to define 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 be headed towards 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. The application of double standards (in regard to cultural recognition) will only undermine a state’s credibility in the global dialogue among civilizations and cultures, and subsequently weaken its position within the community of states.

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 the realms of local, regional and global dimensions of cultural diversity. In this context, the notion of lifelong integrated education gains special relevance also for the realization, and assertion, of a distinct national and cultural identity that is shaped by the constant interaction with other cultures.

A sustainable policy of dialogue has to be based on genuine respect for each other’s value system – an attitude that in itself is rooted in basic human rights (individual as well as collective), which the community of nations has solemnly confirmed on repeated occasions since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. In distinction from – though not in contradiction to – the specific values inherent in each civilization, these basic rights form a system of meta-values, which are the common ground for dialogue.

As explained above, the fundamental values of freedom, tolerance, etc., expressing the essence of human dignity, are all norms on the basis of mutuality. As regards Western civilization, those norms may be derived from Kant’s transcendental philosophy, in particular his notion of the autonomous subject, and they may be explained by means of his Categorical Imperative (“Handle so, daß die Maxime deines Willens jederzeit zugleich als Prinzip einer allgemeinen Gesetzgebung gelten könne“ / “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law”).¹⁵ Those norms are indispensable for the enjoyment of the distinct and specific rights represented – and advocated for – by different cultures and civilizations. In this sense, they are not “exclusive” norms imposed by one side upon the other on a discriminatory basis. However, 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.”

In conformity with this normative approach – that highlights common norms of second order (so-called meta-norms) as condition for the acceptance of a plurality of normative systems of the first order, the practice of civilizational dialogue must be comprehensive (in regard to its global outreach towards all civilizations) and inclusive (in so far as it integrates the economic, social and political levels) at the same time. This requires that no one civilization alone try to establish itself as global “standard-bearer.” The above-mentioned Kyoto Dialogue stressed the need to “carefully contain[ing] attempts at ‘globalizing’ the specific value systems of those currently in power politically or economically.” In this regard, the Conference 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.”

**Universal Civilization and the True Meaning of Globalization**

If conceived in its genuine hermeneutical meaning, a dialogue among civilizations and cultures may bring out the true meaning of “universal civilization.” By its very nature, dialogue, as quest for mutual understanding, is nurtured by an attitude of openness towards different expressions of humanity – synchronically as well as diachronically. In all historical periods, mankind has expressed itself in a variety of life-worlds and distinct horizons of understanding – a process that is still continuing in our era, which is commonly characterized by the term “globalization.” Unlike as proclaimed by an apologist of Western supremacy in the post-Cold War environment, history has not come to an end yet.

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17 See also Hans Köchler, “Civilization as Instrument of World Order? The Role of the Civilizational Paradigm in the Absence of Balance of Power.”
19 Loc. cit., Par. 33.
In view of the universal history of civilizations\textsuperscript{22} and the simultaneity of a multitude of civilizational horizons, dialogue requires a genuine cosmopolitan attitude. This implies the awareness that preserving one’s cultural and civilizational identity is possible without excluding the “other,” and that one’s identity is conditioned by the very awareness of and tolerance towards other civilizations.

The deeper meaning of “globalization” is in fact expressed by the “globality” (or universality) of civilization. The essence of globality lies in positioning one’s own cultural and civilizational awareness as member of a distinct community while at the same time defining one’s specific life-world in the framework of universal culture – by interacting with other civilizations on the basis of equality and mutual respect. This attitude, out of hermeneutical necessity, lets each member of a civilization appreciate the common spiritual heritage of mankind. As explained by Mrs. Nomura, “creating a new civilization on a global level” is indeed one of the major preconditions for peaceful co-existence among all nations.\textsuperscript{23}

*Globality*, understood in this sense, is not identical to, or to be confused with, economic globalization. The latter tends to impose “commercial” values upon virtually all fields of life. It is characterized by a drive towards socio-cultural uniformity, subordinating all spheres of life to the economic domain and in particular to the supposed necessity of exploiting all available resources – material as well as human – for material gain.

Although the apologists of this development, or trend, describe it as irresistible or unstoppable, the underlying argument is philosophically not convincing. The rationale of the process of globalization is based on the assumption that only unhindered economic and technological development, not restrained by ethical considerations or respect for cultural differences, will bring out the full potential of the human race and thus guarantee prosperity to all on a long-term basis.

In sharp distinction from this position – with its “particularist” outlook, based on the supremacy of the economy over all other spheres of life, the project of a dialogue of civilizations is in and of itself universalist and, therefore, represents globality in its original meaning: as a system of open – virtually “borderless” – interaction, on the basis of mutual respect, between distinct expressions of humanity in each and every culture and civilization. This comprehensive approach is not be confused with cultural or ethical relativism because it is


\textsuperscript{23} *My Vision for Lifelong Integrated Education*, loc. cit.
based on the commitment to *common* (i.e. universal) cultural and civilizational values shared by all members of the human race.

By definition, this attitude precludes any form of exclusivism and *unilateralism*. The *ethos* of civilizational dialogue is only compatible with a *multilateral* approach in the cultural as well as the political fields. A genuine and sustainable dialogue among cultures and civilizations may thus prove to be the only viable alternative not only to the divisive forces of economic globalization and its underlying trend towards socio-cultural uniformity, but to perpetual confrontation on a global scale.²⁴

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²⁴ On the implications of the paradigm of the “clash of civilizations” for the global system see also the author’s lecture “The Dialogue of Civilizations and the Future of World Order.” *Foundation Day Speech*, 43rd Foundation Day, Mindanao State University, Marawi City, Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, Philippines, 1 September 2004.