



INTERNATIONAL PROGRESS ORGANIZATION

Dr. Hans Köchler

Founder and President, International Progress Organization
Member of the International Coordinating Committee of the WPF-DC
Professor of Philosophy, University of Innsbruck

TRANSFORMATIONS OF DIALOGUE

Keynote Speech

delivered at the

Opening Plenary Meeting

“Socio-political Transformation: Chance or Challenge for Dialogue?”

of the

Rhodes Forum – 10th Anniversary Session

organized by

World Public Forum “Dialogue of Civilizations”

Rhodes, Greece, 4 October 2012

Check against delivery!

President Yakunin,
 Your Excellencies,
 Friends,
 Ladies and Gentlemen,

On this solemn occasion – when we pay tribute to the World Public Forum “Dialogue of Civilizations” – allow me to share with you some thoughts about what I would like to describe as “transformations of dialogue,” with a brief outlook to the future of our common efforts as a, by now, *global* community of like-minded people.

Some reminiscing on my part will be forgiven, I hope, at this particular moment when we look back on what has been achieved, and try to define the future approach towards a *genuine* dialogue of civilizations as foundation of a just and peaceful world order.

When back in September 1972 – more than four decades ago, I sent a letter to the Philosophy Division of UNESCO, suggesting the organization of a conference on what I described, at the time, as “le dialogue entre les différentes civilisations,” I did not yet know that this notion would become a *basic paradigm* of discourses on world order in the 21st century – as we also had no idea, then, that the bipolar system of the Cold War would suddenly collapse less than two decades later.

In the era of the East-West Conflict, our attention was focused on the most serious threat to peace, namely nuclear confrontation, which we were afraid could result from ideological rivalry and strategic competition between the two power blocs. Our approach, in the International Progress Organization, was informed by the conviction that *cultural* identity has even deeper roots in the collective mind than any *ideological* doctrine, and that better knowledge – and subsequently appreciation – of the “other” culture and life-world may help us build bridges between ideologically and politically deeply divided blocs. This was the reason why, in our 1974 Declaration on “The Cultural Self-comprehension of Nations” we emphasized, in unison with the delegate of UNESCO, the “right to cultural self-realization of all national cultures” and called upon the United Nations to pay attention to the “development of the cultural aspects of foreign policy.” It was clear for us that what was then termed “peaceful co-existence” between nations with different political systems was only sustainable on the basis of *mutual appreciation* of each other’s cultural or civilizational identity. What we identified and described as the “dialectics of cultural self-comprehension” meant, for us, that no culture or civilization can fully understand itself and reach a state of maturity if it is not able and prepared to relate, and reach out to, other civilizations on the basis of mutuality. In *philosophical* terms, and in particular according to the norms of ethics, it would be a *contradictio in adjecto* (a contradiction in itself) if one rejects the

“other” culture or civilization, while at the same time insisting on the full and unfettered realization of one’s own value system and perception of life. A civilization can only flourish if it is open to other influences – in the truest sense of *integration*. History has amply proven that a civilization that refuses to interact with other communities and their distinct traditions, and to accept external influences, is destined to ultimately fail, and to vanish from history sooner rather than later. This is a point convincingly made by the Chinese-American scholar Amy Chua.

Several decades and one *systemic* revolution (at global level) later, we are again confronted with a *bipolarity*, though this time not along ideological but civilizational or (in more specific cases) cultural lines. The collapse of the bipolar order of the Cold War brought about, at least in the political and military domains, a *unipolar* constellation (albeit a temporary one as one would hope). Under the new circumstances, and in particular in the absence of a genuine *balance of power*, the dominant players obviously did not – or could not – resist the temptation to try to *reshape* the global order according to their understanding, or version, of civilization. The 1991 project of a “New World Order,” proclaimed with great fanfare after the second Gulf War, and the subsequent project of a “New Middle East” are cases in point. This self-assertion of a hegemonic power has threatened a new dichotomy, indeed a new kind of East-West conflict between those who claim civilizational supremacy (which is the modern version of “ideological hegemony”) on the one hand and those who aim to assert, or reassert, their distinct cultural identity on the other.

In this context, the paradigm of “dialogue of civilizations” has got a new dimension; it has undergone a transformation by which it has become a kind of antidote, i. e. a means to “neutralize” the impact of increasingly violent confrontations between distinct perceptions of the world that are rooted in competing civilizational identities, including religious beliefs. In connection with major strategic rearrangements in geopolitically sensitive regions in Eurasia in particular, these cultural and religious conflicts (the “culture wars” of the 21st century) have the potential not only to trigger long-lasting civil strife (as for example in Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, or the African nation of Nigeria), but they may bring about a wider “systemic” confrontation between major geopolitical actors – a new version of “proxy war” with civilizational undertones.

In this changed, and highly charged, geopolitical constellation, new fault lines appear – or come to the surface again – within civilizations. The processes of transformation now underway in the Arab world also seem to have been the catalyst of renewed struggles for religious hegemony. The wanton destruction of mosques and Sufi places of worship in Mali and Libya, including that country’s capital, is testimony to these intra-Islamic divisions. (It is worthy of note that these recent events were almost totally neglected by the biased Anglo-American media and their “sister agencies.”) Syria also risks becoming a victim of sectarian conflict, and the unity and territorial

integrity of the country is at stake. The repeated and brutal attacks on Christian worshippers and churches in Nigeria are another frightening testimony of the apparent “renaissance” of religious chauvinism.

It will be one of the major challenges of our era, and a major task for the United Nations Organization and UNESCO, to devise a comprehensive *strategy of dialogue* between the different civilizational, including religious, identities in the highly volatile *unipolar* environment which has resulted from the collapse of the bipolar balance of power. The development towards a *multipolar* – or *multicentric* – order of the future, which means the emergence of a new balance of power, is fraught with many obstacles and risks of armed conflict. We are more or less passive witnesses to these threats on an almost daily basis.

Not only in the Arab world and in the wider Middle East, processes of rapid socio-cultural transformation have, or are about to, profoundly change the political landscape and threaten the “established order” – with far-reaching consequences for global peace and stability. At the same time, military interventions, undertaken in the name of human rights and democracy, have been destabilizing those same regions and have brought about a profound alienation of the affected peoples from the civilization and value system (the “Western way of life”) which the intervening countries represent and claim to “defend.” R2P, “Responsibility to Protect,” has become the buzzword – last year to legitimize direct intervention in Libya, this year (so far) indirect intervention in the Arab Republic of Syria.

In the face of these supposed justifications for the use of armed force, one might ask whether the idea of “dialogue of civilizations” – that requires partnership and mutual respect – has been discredited, or become a utopian dream. As I emphasized before, new problems of social cohesion, inter-religious tensions and violence have arisen in many regions – in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Cultural conflicts and/or military confrontations in distant countries often have had a detrimental effect on religious peace and political stability domestically. This also has become a concern, almost a nightmare, for the leaders of Europe’s increasingly multicultural societies as recent statements of the Prime Ministers of Germany and the United Kingdom, and the former President of France testify.

What is the relevance, we have to ask, of the dialogical paradigm under these circumstances? Is “multiculturalism” (a multicultural society) sustainable under those conditions – especially when the confrontations in question have strong and distinct cultural undertones, or elements of identity politics? How are the socio-political changes that are triggered or advanced by the worldwide (i. e. transnational) use of the “new social media” affecting international peace and security? Are these processes a chance or challenge for dialogue? These are some of the burning

and urgent questions the answer to which will determine the shape and fate of the global order of the 21st century, and which certainly will be explored in the days to come at our Forum here on the ancient island of Rhodes which, over the centuries, has seen many events of the kind I have referred to here.

On behalf of the International Progress Organization, which is proud to have been a partner of the World Public Forum “Dialogue of Civilizations” almost since the beginning, I wish the organizers and friends – under the leadership of President Yakunin and his team in the Executive and Organizing Committees – not only a successful 10th Anniversary Session, but many more decades of creative and critical thinking, and *civilizational self-reflection*. With its sustained efforts, gradually and steadily spanning a “network of dialogue” around the entire globe, the World Public Forum has already made a difference and has had a considerable impact on global discourse. Your continued efforts will be even more needed in the time ahead – so that international civil society may be able to bring about peaceful transformation through dialogue among equal partners in the major *civilizational project* of the 21st century: namely to *reconcile* cultural and national identity with the requirements of global solidarity and peace.

Thank you for your attention.