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Political aspects of
the intercivilizational dialogue
from an Islamic perspective

Study presented at

The International Conference on
Intercivilizational Dialogue

United Nations University, Kyoto, Japan
3rd August, 2001
Introduction:

Fathoming the meaning of the concept of civilization the deep and all-encompassing sense of the latter covers the whole of human activities in the areas of intellectual and literary, artistic, cultural and architectural innovation, together with the values, principles and conceptions about man, the universe and life, as well as modes of conduct, life styles, ways of thinking and perception of things and manifestations surrounding society, ways of interacting with cosmic phenomena and dealing with life problems from its different aspects and facets.

Civilizations are, in essence, the very spirit of peoples and nations as well as their distinctive feature. Perhaps the most comprehensive, definition, the deepest meaning and broadest sense of civilization is vision of the world for a given nation. This definition covers both the terms civilization and culture in their broadest sense.

It is consequently, quite normal that there should be many civilizations and that their distinctive characteristics should be diverse. This is indeed the law of life and universe, because Allah Sublime be He has created humans and has bestowed this very nature upon them all. That is why any action or endeavour or attempt to alter this nature by force of the intellect, by political or economic influence, or by imposition of one single thought is totally in contradiction with the nature of things.

A deep understanding of the history of civilization and of humans, shows clearly a reality of critical importance, to the effect that civilization assumes an upward trend. It, in fact develops and thrives and reaches the height of innovation and creation, and then takes a downward trend and reaches the bottom end in its downfall. Civilization may experience decline but it never disappears altogether. Because the seed of civilization is always alive and moves from one historical stage to another. When a favourable climate is there, it grows and ripens and when it reaches full growth, a fresh civilizational cycle starts.

There are many factors that bring about the decline of civilizations or lead to their revival together with many other additional elements. Civilizational revival is usually the result of a cross-breeding between civilizations, mutual borrowing or integration by the blending of constituents and fundamentals that feed them and make them grow and thrive. Human history is, in fact, a succession of interrelated episodes of cross-breeding, blending, mutual borrowing and interrelation between civilizations witnessed by humans on earth.

This is the seed of dialogue between civilizations, or it is the origin of the emergence of civilizations, their growth and prosperity, as well as their collapse and downfall.

Origin and emergence of dialogue:

If we take into consideration the fact that dialogue is one of the origins of successive civilizations -if we adopt the historical meaning of dialogue which is in our opinion the complementary and exchange process which takes place under different forms and cover long eras of history and probably in a manner that might seem to the historian concerned with the overall manifestations and who does not go deeper into events and their constituents, if we take all this into account, we will be faced with a reality of human history which deserves to be given serious thought and consideration. This reality is that the law of human life created by Almighty Allah is dialogue between humans, in that deep sense which may not correspond to the meaning we give today to dialogue. in the Holy Qur'an there is a verse which underlines this meaning of (knowing each other) between peoples and nations. It shows how
the Most High has created people into nations and tribes to know each other, in order that they come closer to each other and therefore reach entente and mutual understanding.

Almighty Allah says in the Holy Qur’an:

“O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that ye, may know each other. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you” (1).

How can this (knowing each other), in the sense contained in the Holy Qur’an, be possible without paving the way for it by mutual understanding? And how to achieve mutual understanding that is conducive to knowing each other if it is not conducted by the only means available for humans, that is dialogue?

From the perspective of the Islamic civilization, dialogue is deep-rooted in history since Allah the Most High created mankind, breathed into them of His Spirit, endowed them with wisdom and intelligence and guided them to the right path, in order to establish their lives on the basis of sound nature until they reached full growth and perfection within the limits possible for man’s perfection, thus creating human civilization in one form or another, through a long process stretching in time.

In the light of the foregoing, dialogue between civilizations is not only a necessity and an obligation, but it is also one of the foundations of human history. In fact, there is no civilization without dialogue with another civilization or with many civilizations whether it is close to them in space or time or separated by historical eras.

We today in or moves within the dialogue between civilizations, do not start from the vacuum, but we build on the foundations established by those who shaped the successive human civilizations ever since man knew a civilization in one form or another.

Given this historical foundation and comprehensive human significance, we can say that dialogue between civilizations, which was one of the features of civilizations throughout history, is indeed one of the specificities of history. In fact, any nation with civilization whatever the degree of its advancement or level of innovation has always taken from and given to another civilization, has borrowed from it and contributed to it, and has blended with it whatever the extent of the blending, for this is a central element of any given civilization in one era or another. Let us give two instances, not for the sake of stressing this reality which has been clearly established, but only for more clarification:

First: Both the Roman and Greek civilizations have taken from the Egyptian and Phenician civilizations. Further still, some modern researchers maintain that the origin of the Greek civilization is ancient Egypt. This field is open to research, anyway.

Second: Islamic civilization which took and borrowed from the civilizations of nations which embraced Islam, including the Persian civilization, the Hindu civilization and the Greek civilization.

However, the West in general believes in the centrality of the European civilization even through this does not correspond to the historical reality. The American historian Will Durant points out in the introduction of his famous book (the Story of Civilization):
“the regional fanaticism that prevailed in our conventional historical writings start the recounting of history from Greece and summarize Asia in one line, is not just a simple scientific error, but perhaps a considerable failure in depicting reality and a serious shortcoming in our intelligence. The future is looking to the Pacific Ocean. The mind should, therefore continue in that direction”(2).

Our establishing dialogue at this era of history is based on the human legacy that is highly diversified. And this is not a new initiative without a link with history. We of course, are fully aware of the fact that dialogue in our times and in the future must be developed and diversified, deepened and broadened, in terms of thought and practice, terminology and purport. It should also rise to the level we want it to attain, in that dialogue will lead to preventing crises, trouble or turmoil which are now standing in the way of mankind which is presently engaged in shaping a new world in which would prevail human principles which have been the subject of consensus of all civilizations without exception.

We therefore know that dialogue is a human necessity and extremely pressing, because for mankind today either it engages in dialogue, understanding each other, co-exists and cooperates in what is beneficial, or its destiny will be bad, its present will become more troubled and it will be more difficult for it to reach the objectives which humans are aspiring for in today’s world.

Aspects of dialogue:

As dialogue is a foundation in human history and a necessity required for mutual understanding and co-existence within the values of justice and equality and the principles of peace and security, it is therefore necessary that the dialogue should cover many aspects and bring together all sides.

One of the things which we should make clear here is that the aspects of dialogue are interrelated even if the parties to the dialogue agree to limit the area of it to a particular subject, because the nature of dialogue, being an intellectual process and cultural activity in the first place, is that it covers many aspects, subjects and issues, and that its scope is broad, especially when the objective prerequisites are met for a genuine and honest dialogue that is designed to further the human interests first and foremost.

Dialogue has, therefore, many aspects, including political and economic, cultural and intellectual, legal and legislative, military and security-related, literary and artistic. And these are aspects which are generally hard to dissociate.

Political aspects of dialogue:

However, in this paper, we shall examine only the political aspects of dialogue between civilizations for two reasons:

First: The political factor is the most powerful and influential in shaping the hallmarks of the present and the future for all mankind.

Second: The political issues which need to be addressed in order to reach a human consensus thereon, are so varied and so numerous, and many of them need to be examined thoroughly for the purpose of correcting their contexts and objectives.
The broader the meaning of dialogue we adopt, the more diversified are the political aspects of dialogue between, civilizations. However, in our view, the major political aspects of the dialogue among civilizations are as follows:

First: Dialogue to remove injustice and aggression against the peoples struggling for self-determination, Palestine as an example.

Second: Dialogue to establish human rights with internationally recognized standards and respect for the right to difference where there is a conflict with the teachings of religions or a contradiction with the cultural specificities of peoples and nations, and whose preservation we regard as one of the human rights.

Third: Dialogue to apply the rulings of international law fairly on all international political issues whose settlement is difficult; to give back the legitimate rights to their rightful claimants and do justice to those who have been wronged regardless of any consideration.

Fourth: Dialogue to save humanity from natural disasters as a result of wrong policies that cause environmental pollution, desertification, water resources depletion, deviations of scientific research in the field of genetic engineering, usage of drugs, devastating diseases, children and juvenile delinquency, by collaborating in formulating international legislations to lessen the impact of those disasters, and problems.

Fifth: Dialogue to agree on a true and acceptable formula for the prevailing concepts of terrorism, extremism and fanaticism so that each concept would correspond to a particular case and so that there would be no willful ambiguity or confusion, in order to avoid generalization in such cases.

Sixth: Dialogue to develop the United Nations system in the light of the new realities being witnessed by the world and in order to renew international action and modernize its mechanisms with the aim of promoting the role of the United Nations and its agencies, to achieve justice and equality and establish balanced international relations away from any pressures or manipulation.

Seventh: Dialogue to remove injustice against the countries of the South which are grappling with economic problems as a result of exploitation exercised by the countries of the North in the past, and are still exercising it in a way or another, so as to achieve justice for the international community.

Eighth: Dialogue between the followers of the religions based on equality and attachment to religious values which reject injustice aggression and superiority or outstandings on any grounds, in order to achieve faith in Allah the Most High, spread virtue and righteousness and establish the principles of justice and equity.

Ninth: Dialogue to underline the humanness of modern world civilization by casting aside the concept of the European or Western centrality in general, because the current human civilization is a common human heritage and the product of the blending and cross-breeding of successive civilizations throughout history.
The nine aspects, though they may be different in terms of importance and priority and even if some of them have a social or intellectual or religious character, they are all, in essence, political aspects of the dialogue between civilizations, for they all agree on the vital interests of mankind, are linked with their present and future and aim, first and foremost, at achieving welfare and happiness for all humans.

Difficulties and obstacles

Anyone wishing to address the political aspects of dialogue among civilizations would, inevitably, be faced with a host of difficulties and a series of obstacles, owing to multiple political impediments, resulting from the hegemony of some world powers and their domination over all actions and initiatives in this connection. One major obstacle to the serious, constructive dialogue among civilizations, could perhaps be the misunderstanding of the term 'Politics' and the subjective linkage between 'politics' and the 'direct political action'. Indeed, politics is a science, a culture, an acquired expertise and a consciousness of the nature of society and the type of difficulties it faces. 'Political action', by contrast, is a practice, a daily activity and an involvement in direct action through the legal channels whereby one caters for the needs of society and helps upgrade the standards of life and achieve the common objectives and goals of the society at large(3).

The political dimension of dialogue among civilizations consists of promoting the political action to the upper civilizational level where the interlocutors could serve the common human interests and address any subjects relating, implicitly or explicitly, to politics, provided they stick to the lofty human values and adopt the appropriate, positive means and approaches.

The short experience of the world over the last decade points to the fact that the big powers are determined to impose a single life pattern and a specific way of thinking on all human societies, indifferently. They also lobby hard to have all human societies following their model and imitating them in every detail of individual and community life.

This political model, which tramples on the national will and disrespects the cultural identities of peoples and nations, is not only a violation of the international law, but also a breach of the universal human values and a defiance of the genuine desire of the international community to establish the principles of equity, justice and equality in international relations.

The big powers, which exercise their hegemony on the world by means of a World Order intended to stamp the will of peoples and nations, are running counter the stream of universal human civilization handed down from generation to generation. Modern contemporary civilization is not a pure European or American civilization. It is a mixed universal civilization shared by all societies, which means that the tendency to take Europe, or the West in general, as a reference is synonymous with the spirit of dialogue, on the understanding that dialogue is a call for mutual understanding of the issues of common interest to the parties involved. American hegemony, in particular, and European domination, in general, as a continuation of the colonial past of these powers, are the main stumbling blocks crippling the good efforts being exerted to establish genuine civilizational coexistence, cultural understanding, economic cooperation and political entente liable to soften effects of the crises tearing apart two thirds of the world population.

The way to dialogue among civilizations shall remain deadlocked as long as the big powers monopolize authority under false doctrinal and political pretexts which do not stand to any reason. Therefore, the major mission vested with the intellectual elite, especially
people involved in dialogue among civilizations, is to promote joint cooperation and pool efforts to denounce and refute the colonial thought, which shelters behind the slogans of universal civilization, and to combat it by any available intellectual and cultural means. The elite shall also capitalize on the available international and regional channels, make use of science, logic and evolve perennial, objective approaches likely to benefit to all humanity.

A major obstacle to the universal call launched, this year, for dialogue among civilizations is the 'globalization' imposed on and against the international community. Indeed, the globalization forced on the peoples and nations of the world is a Western - American globalization aimed to impose its material values and quantity-based concepts at the detriment of the human values and the standards of quality. It also tries its best to force the world to accept a dogmatic package built on the denigration of the rest of world civilizations, in the forefront of them is the Islamic civilization(4). This is most eloquently reflected in the theses developed recently by a host of American strategists, among them is Samuel Huntington who pointed out that the major problem facing the West was not Islamic fundamentalism, but Islam itself, on the ground that Islam was a different civilization with a people convinced of the superiority of their culture and obsessed with the weakness of their power (5).

It is a deadly methodological mistake to assume that a given civilization is superior and better than other civilizations, on that a given civilization is inferior and may constitute a threat to the world. Indeed, any assumption of this type would be an incitement of world nations against that target civilization, and would, therefore, trigger a ravaging conflict that would only play further havoc with the international community. However, the feeling of pride of one’s civilization, although a natural feeling, should not evolve into an incitement to what could be called 'civilizational terrorism', if so to speak.

Our critical attitude towards this globalization which reverses the spirit of civilization and runs counter to the human nature is not specific to our own vision of the world. It is also a stance shared by several European and, mostly, American strategists. In his famous book 'Rise and fall of big powers' in which he foresaw the fall of the United States of America in the balance of international power -in the historical sense of the term, after completion of the historical cycle, several decades afterwards-, Paul Kennedy stresses that nobody could reasonably deny that the United States was, at the time being, the big empire dominating the world order with its sophisticated military power, technological progress, economic capabilities and political influence. However, this empire which believes that it could control, for ever, the destiny of millions of peoples must, soon or late, yield to the forces of dissolution which have wiped out all empires across history (6).

American writer, Thomas Freedman, pointed out that the world faced horrible political and civilizational battles and that globalization meant Americanization. He highlighted the fact that the United States was a mad power, indeed a dangerous revolutionary power. He indicated that the International Monetary Fund was a 'pet' compared to globalization, and that, in the past, the big used to devour the small, but, today, the fast devours the slow(7).

If dialogue is a communication with the other and a process of exchange, built on the recognition of civilizational and cultural diversity, globalization, by contrast, is a negation of plurality and any notion of 'the other', whether in terms of culture, information, economy or society. This 'negation' is destined to favour the American model, that is the Western liberal, capitalist model led by the United States. From this perspective, globalization, as presented, is a colonial project(8).
Future prospects:

The international situation, as we have succinctly described, should not bear negatively on the process of dialogue among civilizations which shall be launched this year. Dialogue among civilizations should proceed ahead, steadily, since nothing could twist down the will of peace-loving peoples and nations or deter them from engaging in the pursuit of dialogue to build a prosperous and stable future pervaded by the values of brotherhood, coexistence and cooperation, within the framework of the international law and the principles underlying the universal human civilization ever since its inception.

Dialogue among civilizations, at this critical juncture, should be geared to working out ethical rules governing the international relations and the political, economic, cultural, scientific, information and military activities of the international community.

Today, Humanity is looking forward to infusing fresh impetus in the international relations and energising their civilizational and human dimensions, by means of consolidating the ethical components of the international law and the international relations between countries and governments, given the fact that ethics are the soul of civilization and the essence of nations' experience.

A number of international instruments, including the United Nations' Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights should, therefore, be revised in the light of the deep changes and mutations taking place around the world, in such a way as to affirm solemnly the right to preserve cultural specificities of peoples and nations, as well as the right to 'civilizational' and 'Cultural' difference. Efforts shall also be exerted to promote the national laws reflecting cultural specificities and to nullify the primacy of one nation’s will in the name of international law over the national laws, especially with regard to national cultural specificities and the rules and regulations stemming from the precepts of Religions.

It is our hope that the present conference, as well as the international conferences and fora to be organized this year, within the framework of the United Nations' Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, shall launch strong appeals to the international community to have the international rules observed and to help initiate an open, responsible dialogue among modern civilizations, to give substance to this new project, in a bid to halt the practices breaching the international law under different banners, most important of which are globalization, new world order, European reference, etc.

Conclusion:

The 'Rabat Communiqué', issued on 12 July 2001, at the closing of the International Symposium on 'Dialogue among civilizations in a changing world' organized by ISESCO in the capital of the Kingdom of Morocco, under the high patronage of the Moroccan Sovereign, King Mohamed VI, enshrined a number of general principles and guidelines for dialogue among civilizations. We believe that it would be useful and appropriate to include excerpts therefrom in the conclusion of this paper, as they reflect our common interest, whether at the level of the political side or the cultural, intellectual and human aspects of dialogue among civilizations. The Communiqué focused on the following:
The respect of civilizational diversity as embodied in the cultural specificities is one of the inalienable human rights. It is imperative for the international community to spare no effort to safeguard this diversity in civilizational identities and cultural specificities, it being a source of strength and creativity for humanity;

Dialogue among civilizations is a must, indeed a moral and human duty. It is a prerequisite for initiating a positive and fruitful cooperation and establishing a peaceful co-existence among humans. It requires, in addition to coherent wills and good intentions, a commitment to the goals aimed to reinforce the human values and principles, which constitute the common denominator of all civilizations and cultures;

Dialogue among civilizations contributes largely to bringing peoples and nations together and removing the barriers arising from mutual misunderstanding and unfounded stereotypes inhabiting the minds of people from a specific culture about the culture of other nations. Continuation of dialogue and enlargement of its scope becomes, therefore, a mission devolved upon intellectuals and religious scholars, as it is part of the dialogue among religions, and also upon cultural and scientific competencies and all segments of society, as well as a responsibility to be discharged by all those concerned with the future of humanity, each one from his position;

To be more efficient and useful, dialogue among civilizations requires the multiplication of international fora in such a way as to cover different areas and regions at the initiative of institutions and organizations having a common interest as well as universities and cultural and academic circles. However, their efforts must be focused on spreading far and wide the values of dialogue and co-existence with a view to paving the way for rapprochement and understanding, and consolidating the human bonds linking different peoples and nations;

The paramount importance of dialogue among civilizations has increased at the present stage of human history owing to the growing challenges facing humanity in all fields, and to the exacerbation of the crises threatening the life of individuals and communities and hindering the efforts exerted for comprehensive development, thus enlarging the gap between industrialized and developing countries, and triggering wars and tensions in various areas of the world;

The aspired dialogue should tackle the questions preoccupying humanity and weighing on its conscience, and search for solutions inspired from the essence of civilizations and cultures. Dialogue should seek, in the first place, to combat injustice as well as the violation of human rights and denial of the right of peoples to self-determination, in addition to countering hegemony and the attempt to impose a unipolar intellectual and cultural system on the international community. Dialogue among civilizations should also aim at preventing all kinds of aggression against the peoples aspiring for freedom and liberty, and should serve, at all levels, as a means for standing against the deprivation of peoples of their rights, which are confirmed by international laws and guaranteed by the Revealed Religions as well as the human principles;

Dialogue among civilizations and cultures should be based on mutual respect among all peoples belonging to these cultures and civilizations, and should protect the principles of justice and equity. It should also contribute to giving impetus to the efforts exerted by the international community with a view to reinforcing tolerance and establishing peace and security as well as cultural and civilizational co-existence among human beings;
We hold it as truth that the most important aspects of dialogue among civilizations are the political aspects, which directly relate to the general international situation marked by the prevalence of non-civilized policies disrespecting all human civilizations.

I would like to conclude this paper by citing a saying of the Prophet Muhammed (Peace Be Upon Him) “None of you will become a true believer until he likes for his brother what he likes for himself”.

Notes

(1) Hujurat or the Inner Apartments Verse 13

(2) Will Durant, Story of Civilization edition of Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization, Volume I, Beirut Dar Al Jalil publishing house, 1988. Civilization for Will Durant is “a social system that helps man increase his cultural production. And civilization is made up of four elements: economic resources, political systems, moral customs, science and arts which start whence trouble and turmoil end”. Volum I, p. 3.
(3) Politics in the Islamic civilizational understanding is any action destined to achieve the well-being of society, provided it be in line with the precepts of the Shariah. A just policy never conflicts with the Shariah. It rather joins the Shariah and forms part and parcel therefrom. Political education in Islam, by Dr. Abdulaziz Othman Altwajri, Publications of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2001.


(8) Ibid., p. 19.