Civilisational Dialogue: Understanding Differences

Two summers ago in Oxford, at the invitation of the Centre for Islamic Studies, Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the UN, delivered a keynote lecture on the need for civilisational dialogue. His lecture expressed, and greatly encouraged, a growing mood. Sometimes, when we witness the actions of extremists—people who are ready to defile and destroy what has been treasured for centuries by traditions other than their own—we may be tempted to abandon dialogue. Violent extremism—in the form of tribal genocide as we saw in central Africa, or in the form of religious-cultural vandalism as we saw in Afghanistan perpetrated in the name of Islam, or perpetrated against Islam in the name of Christianity in the former Yugoslavia, or in the name of Hinduism in India—can cause us to lose heart. But extremists are few, even if they command much attention; and they do not represent the mainstream of the traditions which they claim to be defending or promoting. In some respects, the extremists prove the argument, the case for tolerance and understanding between the world's states and peoples. The Director General of UNESCO, Koichiro Matsurra has described the idea of dialogue among civilizations as an invitation for us all mentally to leap over our ancient cultural divides in order better to understand not only one another's world view and sense of right and wrong, but also our irreplaceable respective contributions to our common humanity's pooled cultural heritage.

There is certainly a growing constituency of opinion in the world that favours cultural and economic independence for the world's peoples, to complement and dignify political independence. There is a demand for policies that will preserve cultural and civilisational diversity. There is a desire for co-existence and open dialogue to replace mutual fears and suspicions, and surreptitious efforts to manipulate and manage. In part, this welcome tendency is a response to the growth of transnational or immigrant communities and the need to behave decently towards them; in part, it reflects the increasing awareness of common problems, especially environmental ones; and in part too, it is owed to the vague but strong feeling that material wealth and political power are not a reliable or sufficient means of increasing human worth and well-being. All of these factors enable the student of other civilisations to suspend some of the older assumptions, not least the assumption that the decay and disappearance of these other civilisations is inevitable.

We accordingly observe a significant shift in the orientation of what used to be called 'area studies'. The purpose of such studies is no longer to inform and enable military strategy or economic enterprise in foreign parts. Instead, the purpose is to accumulate, through multi-disciplinary
collaboration, an integrated body of information that aims to represent the whole-story of how a
civilisation came to be. This story tells how a people managed their natural and human resources, the
modes of co-operation and competition they evolved, their crafts, commerce and trade, their systems
of values and definitions of well-being, and their ways of inheriting their past and passing it on. Since
the material researched includes technology and law, politics and economics, as well as religion and
artistic and cultural traditions, the academic expertise that is brought to bear is far wider than the
'museum' disciplines of anthropology, philology, archaeology, and art history. Even in these
disciplines, modern techniques of interrogating and interpreting remains and artefacts, along with
improvements in the way oral traditions are recorded and discussed, make it possible to build up
more multi-layered and multi-dimensional understanding of the way other peoples live or used to live.

What is most striking, when one reviews findings from such research, is the sheer adaptivity of
human beings. Few, if any, peoples in human history were so isolated that their civilisation evolved
without confronting and overlapping with the civilisation of others. Civilisation is thus almost always
the story of adaptation both to a particular natural environment and a particular political environment,
the neighbourhood of other peoples. In that experience of adaptivity lie the resources which, if
engaged with sufficient patience and political imagination, will enable the different societies of the
world to co-exist with peace and some measure of justice.

We should not underestimate the effort required if such co-existence is to be achieved. We must not
try to dictate the aims and outcomes of dialogue by too narrow a choice of interlocutors or subject-
matter; and we must not insist beforehand on the use of particular terminology. For example, in
respect of dialogue between the Islamic world and the West, it is easier to talk only with those who
already speak in the language of Western civilisation, who are willing to discuss (let us say)
accountable government and minority rights in the vocabulary of secular political science. But people
who can do this, and do it well, are not necessarily representative of their societies, nor have their
support. Far better to allow that such matters can also be fruitfully expressed in the language of
ethical and religious imperatives.

Stable government is only achieved with the consent of the people governed. Such consent cannot be
secured by the overlay of political habits whose rationale or legitimacy, for the mass of people
concerned, is abstract, disconnected from their past and present experience, and remote from what
they hold to be sources of authority.
Among the best reasons for preserving civilisational and cultural diversity is that, under the pressures of globalisation, people are finding it increasingly difficult to belong to where they are. Globalisation is driven by strictly commercial mechanisms, by businesses seeking to minimise and spread production costs and increase market share. All the advantages for shareholders, and all the disadvantages for shop-floor workers, of assembly-line production, are increased manifold by conducting operations in different legal jurisdictions and using different currencies. The separation of decision-making processes from the places and people affected by them undermines their sense of autonomy, dignity and relevance, while increasing their sense of vulnerability. The psychological and social consequences are similar for both the developed and the less-developed societies, but infinitely more severe for the latter. Local loyalties and local bonds are an essential basis for active citizenship: where people do not feel they belong, they cannot easily be motivated to participate constructively; they turn away from initiatives to improve local conditions. People unsure of their own worth need higher levels of indulgence and gratification. While there are many, complex reasons for the increase in drug abuse and anti-social behaviour such as street-violence and rage crimes, the loss of a supportive community is certainly a major contributing factor.

Over the long term, it will become necessary to re-affirm the human need for physically real neighbourhood-family, community, locally produced and marketed goods and services-to counterbalance the sheer mass of inputs that come from beyond the neighbourhood and continually take individuals away from themselves. In the short term, efforts should be made to evolve an international legal framework to discipline multinational businesses so that their negative effects upon the immediate human environment, just as upon the immediate natural environment, are properly monitored and, to the extent practicable, offset.

Belonging to a culture and civilisation is an essential component of self-identity and self-worth. It enables the individual to learn independence of mind and tastes, and it contributes to the self-confidence which allows ease in the company of people who are of different mind and different tastes. The advances in transport and communication technologies, and the substantial migrations of people across civilisational boundaries, have thrust different peoples into the same neighbourhood over a relatively short period of time—barely half a century. Most people have been able to adjust their sense of identity to the new realities, but not all. A few have resorted to extremist associations that hark back to some past ideal of a racial or national or religious integrity. The manifestos of these associations often combine paranoid sentiments about having been betrayed with the heroic posture of being engaged in a last battle for survival. The paranoia is used to justify
vilification of others, to incite hatred, and to express it in acts of violence. Recent experience of communal violence in the Balkans and the threat of the same on a huge scale in India should remind us of the need to be vigilant, and to try to establish pluralism world-wide as the legal and moral norm.

Both educational institutions and the media bear special responsibility for the promotion of positive images of a pluralist society. Unfortunately, the information content and quality of images of minority communities tends, even when not ill-meant, to be rather poor. Consider, for example, the number of times 'Islam' is indicated on television by playing the call to prayer in the background to a news item or dramatic scene. The content of the call to prayer is rarely relevant and never discussed; it is merely an easy identifying label. This emphasises the fact that the Islamic community is 'different'-the function of labels is only to differentiate-while refusing to provide any information about how. Mere 'difference' of this sort is not just vaguely threatening. It can also, especially in broadcast media reporting, lead to associating local minorities with crisis events abroad, events to which they are not in fact connected and over which they have no control.

Particularly for primary schools, more thought needs to go into the preparation of teaching material that identifies what is common, as well as what is different, between different cultural and religious traditions. The aim should be reciprocal understanding and respect so that, from a very early age, minority community children are comfortable in identifying as such. The evidence is overwhelming that where identity is not held comfortably, children under-perform and under-achieve in every way. Often unwittingly, some of the material used in multi-cultural teaching links minorities with exotic or 'foreign' tastes and habits. There needs to be a clear and consistent message that people of different traditions can live alongside each other, and that, over time, traditions overlap and change, and take root in different places. The goal of socialisation processes, education among them, should be integration and not assimilation of differences, on the basis of equality and answerability under the same laws.

The facts of demography mean that, in certain neighbourhoods, minorities are sufficiently numerous to support schools of their own. In the UK, there is a growing demand for Islamic secondary schools. It might be argued, against such schools, that they could produce adults who do not participate effectively in the life of the wider community, who, in effect, constitute another generation of new immigrants not properly adjusted to the host community. However, if the schools’ curricular and extra-curricular activities produce confident young people, well-qualified, according to national criteria, to pursue occupational or other careers and life-styles in an open market, then there can be no argument against such schools. Ghetto cultures arise only where communities are excluded by law or by custom, or by their inability to enter the mainstream for want of relevant qualifications.
Once minority schools become well established and have a sustained academic record, we can expect that they would be welcomed into all the exchanges of staff and students, sports and other activities, run at regional and national level, and become an integral part of the wider educational system.

Exchange education are a vital programmes in the field of tool for the spread of understanding and the ethic of collaboration among peoples of different civilisational background. The Japan Foundation is one example of an institution that seeks to improve inter-cultural understanding through the provision of grants and study assistance programmes. The Commonwealth Foundation supports fellowships, mostly tenable in the United Kingdom, for Commonwealth citizens to widen their education, skills and experience. Its valuable work complements similar initiatives that have been managed for many years by the British Council. ISESCO too has exchange programmes for its member states. One would hope to see an enlargement of programmes like these, with reciprocal arrangements between academic institutions world-wide. The Erasmus project within the EU, though regionally based, suggests a possible model. An important initiative in the direction of academic co-operation that explicitly sets out to cross civilisational boundaries is the Europe-Asia university project in Malaysia. Many established universities already host specially focused cross-disciplinary institutions (for example, the Centre for Islamic Studies in Oxford) which open up avenues for collaborative research and publications programmes with input from experts drawing on the most diverse intellectual and cultural traditions. One expects that in coming years, similar institutions in non-Western countries, one thinks in particular of India, China and Japan, will be able to make an increasing contribution to the understanding of different cultures and civilisations, not least their own, and do so on the basis of collaborative endeavour and different perspectives.

The domination of Western perspectives and preoccupations is nowhere more evident than in works of reference-encyclopaedias, general histories etc.-which help to define and periodise subject-matter, to control curricula, and to shape public attitudes. Self-evidently, one cannot study everything: priority has to be given to the topics most relevant to the intended readership. However, even within the same area of relevance one can make substantial improvements: for example, formal history is not now confined to the story of kings and conquests; major options in every faculty enable study of social and economic background, so that history is the story of all the people, not just of their rulers. Similarly, it should be possible, following more inclusive editorial policies, to embrace the concerns and contributions of other peoples and times, and appreciate their achievements. If I may give an
example from my own field of Islamic studies—it is astonishing that most histories of natural sciences and mathematics for secondary school use simply ignore the Islamic/Arabic contributions in these fields. Any specialised histories, meant for post-graduate use, do, of course, cover the Islamic period. My point is that the information, long well-known, does not reach general public consciousness and so does not help educate a conception of culture and civilisation as a universal human heritage.

If one looks at human civilisation from a world-wide perspective, and if one removes the condition that to be significant and interesting a cultural achievement must be associated with military conquest and imperial spread—it is much easier to affirm the worth of the contributions of non-Western origin. I do not deny that it is good for an average educated Malay or Japanese or Chinese person to know about the French Revolution, or to appreciate the intellectual and political legacy of a Thomas Jefferson. But how many average educated French or American person could name a significant event or significant personage from Malay or Japanese or Chinese history? The answer will be very few. Of course, there will be many well-informed specialists who could do so. But that is not the point.

It is most important that, to supplement more inclusive editorial policies in the preparation of general reference materials, resources should be allocated to the preparation in accessible format of studies of persons and events regarded as seminal or defining in their different cultural contexts. With the possibilities opened up by electronic publication, it may be feasible to offer such materials on-line, in layered format, so that students of different age or ability, or with different approaches, can navigate their way to the information level they want.

That is, perhaps, a humble practical note upon which to end. But such practical measures are essential if we are to educate ordinary people to conceive of culture and civilisation as a universal human heritage, to which all peoples have contributed and which all peoples can help to share and enlarge. That conception is one most relevant to our time, and its prevalence is a condition for worthwhile dialogue and interrelationship, which are the conditions for a reliable peace.