Towards a Dialogue of Learning and Criticism

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I. Analysis

1. Respect for Cultures in Civilizations

There is no agreement between the three main European languages, English, French and German on the sense of the term civilization in relation to the term culture. They all agree that civilization means the process by which human beings become civilized, i.e. become citizens (latin: civis). However Germans have a tendency to oppose Kultur to Civilisation as intellectual, literary and poetical creations versus scientific and technical achievements, whereas Frenchmen mostly integrate culture into civilisation as its ethical, aesthetic and philosophical core; finally Englishmen often consider the two terms as synonyms or simply take civilization as true culture.

I wish to stress however that if we totally identify the two terms, we may overlook an important aspect in understanding a civilization, namely that standardization, i.e. more and more homogeneous development of science and technology in different parts of the world, does not correspond to the development of historical, social and individual self-understanding connected to particular languages and traditions. You can find the same MacDonald restaurants all over the world, the same luxury hotels and the same factories (same structure and organization) in very different countries and continents. Yet religious, ethical and philosophical conceptions may differ strongly from one region to another. So, the idea of integration of culture into civilization as its most important core (according to French language) is the most intelligent way of taking differences between civilizations seriously while still having a realistic view of the difficulties of dialogue between civilizations. This dialogue concerns the encounter of cultures, which may seem to have very little in common.

What we see is, on the one hand, that modern technical and scientific systems and insights have already become globalized to a very high degree. This means that it functions as an international and economical network in which decisions to an increasing extent are taken independently of national political powers, and which has its own norms and laws of recruitment, loyalty and solidarity and even - as Chandra Muzaffar reminded us - its own speculative world called “casino capitalism”. Talking today about globalization often simply means the development of this network. If it is vulnerable, it is as a global body whose coherence and stability depend on the whole and not only on local events.

On the other hand, we must recognize that the development of historical, social and individual self-understanding in narratives, poetry and other symbolic expressions cannot be isolated from its local roots with its particular languages and traditions. It has its integrity from the coherence of lived experiences in historical time and social space, and its maintenance depends on the social and spiritual life in the local society. There is here no simple accumulation of achievements. Culture is - as Paul Claval has said - a plastic reality. Therefore it needs continually renovators: new poets, new artists, new thinkers etc. who are capable of expressing the power of old deep convictions in particular new situations. This renewal is often not accepted in the beginning when it seems to undermine the tradition. But the culture dies if it is not regularly challenged by new ideas, which transform its function as existential ground of social and individual life. It is vulnerable in this very process of renewal in the tradition of values and beliefs and needs protection against violence, i.e. against that power which reduces living beings to pure objects of manipulation.
Therefore, in our day the so-called discourse ethics (Jürgen Habermas in Germany, Eric Weil in France and others) has argued with reason that there is no real dialogue without renouncing any use of violence. Dialogue means communication without violence because it implies two partners who are equally free to claim what they think to be true and right. In that sense only "the best argument prevails".

In the same way a true dialogue between civilizations must respect the other which then is the cultural integrity of a particular social life in time and space. Dialogue of civilizations must be a communication without violence, because violation hurts the deep convictions of the other.

2. Dialogue is not only exchange of information.

Moreover, dialogue is not only exchange of information on the purely technical level (in particular by Information Technology), but a deep communication between convictions.

It is important to stress this conception of dialogue in a time where communication often is explained as a technology of transmission of information, as if the human being were only information machines constructed for treatment and storage of signs transmitted and received.

Human beings are much more than such devices. Every human being is a temporal being in a social context where it looks for the possibilities of living a good life. It can fight against others in order to establish a room for its own life. It can also make appeal to others for help, assistance and advice in order to create a community for good life. And finally, it can invite others to be confirmed in their existence and thereby encourage others to participate in a community. In the first case the other is my enemy. In the second case the other is my aid and perhaps my judge. In the third case the other is my friend or the person I love. But in all these cases the communication is much more than exchange of information and sometimes it can even function without any exchange of important information or without any words at all.

In the same way, we may say that in communication between civilizations the exchange of information is not the only event and even not the most important event, although it cannot take place without transmission of information. In truth, exchange of information is the most important thing for the technical and scientific communication in globalized systems. But in the encounter between cultures we must not only learn facts about the other culture but also learn how to understand and interpret its existential meaning in life and practice. And a purely technical dialogue does not contribute to mutual understanding of basic human experiences; only existential dialogue makes possible approaches between cultural and moral strangers from different civilizations. Only this type of dialogue makes it possible to learn wisdom from the other.

But what is existential dialogue?
3. Four levels of existential dialogue

There are at least four different levels of existential dialogue\(^1\), which must be taken into account in a dialogue of civilizations:

(1) *The dialogue in ordinary life and practice* is the dialogue on the most fundamental level. Between moral and cultural strangers it takes place when people from different cultures meet together and involve themselves in common tasks and common practice. They do not necessary speak together about something “important”, but they communicate in banal life, for instance by talking commonplace, by eating together and/or by moving around in order to do and see something together. The dialogue here consists of the experience of the other as a human fellow, understanding of the other by sharing the most elementary things in life. Without this fundamental dialogue by which we recognize human strangers as true human beings like ourselves there would be no real dialogue between strangers and surely no dialogue between different civilizations. Thus dialogue in ordinary life is the basis of all other kinds of dialogue.

(2) *The dialogue in intellectual exchange of interpretations of life and practice* is the next level of communication. Between moral and cultural strangers this is the dialogue among intellectuals who try to understand concepts, symbols, and ways of thinking which are developed in foreign traditions and contexts. It is limited to specialists, i.e. to those who have studied and are studying foreign thought in myths, symbols, stories and treatises. The basis of this intellectual exchange of views is the translation of concepts, expressions and texts. Let us take our conference here as an example. Most of the papers and discussions go on in English. For many of us this means that our thought has to be translated from another language into English. We meet in a language, which for most of us is not our mother tongue. But translation has limits. We cannot translate all experiences and some experiences can better be rendered by one language than by another. Two things follow: (1) translation is possible and makes dialogue between civilizations possible and (2) we remain cultural strangers even in talking same language and using same concepts.

(3) *The dialogue in mutual effort for discovering common experiences and complementary interpretations despite differences* — different geographical origin, culture roots, education — is the third level of dialogue. It succeeds when, although we have recognized that we think differently about norms and customs, we discover that nevertheless we share some fundamental beliefs about what is important in life. At this level the dialogue is supported by the *hope* that there might be some common ground of experience shared by human beings belonging to the most different cultural background. It might be impossible to approach this common ground, and we could therefore give up every hope of mutual understanding between all human beings, but in dialogue between cultural strangers it is more fruitful to adopt the idea that behind all oppositions and dissimilarities there is a kind of practical truth to which all human beings can agree, a kind of universal ethos. Therefore we must believe in a common human ground.

We can say about the project of mutual understanding amongst cultures nearly the same as Paul Ricoeur once said about his philosophical project of reading all great philosophers of his own culture: "I hope that all great philosophers are within the same truth, that they have the same pre-

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\(^1\) My distinction between four different levels of existential dialogue is inspired by an article of Michael Amaldoss, sj: "Freedom in the spirit and interreligious dialogue" (in: *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, Peeters, 8/1998/1, p. 5-18, where he distinguishes between (1) the dialogue of life, (2) the dialogue of intellectual exchange, (3) the dialogue of spiritual experience and (4) the dialogue of common action (p. 12-15). I want to thank Laura Feldt who drew my attention to this article.
ontological understanding of their relationship to being”. Let us put it in these terms: We hope

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that all big civilizations are expressions of the same human reality beyond every different interpretation of that reality. This hope gives us reason for openness to all other cultures than our own and it is capable of being the driving force in the dialogue of civilizations.

(4) The forth level of dialogue is dialogue between human beings sharing the same historical experiences of values and beliefs, discussing their interpretations and practical implications and participating in common projects. From the moment we find common ground of experience the dialogue changes its nature and becomes communication between human beings in fellowship. This communication does not simply consist in peaceful common life, but is a real search of valid insight into human reality. It is a struggle by which each participant in the dialogue criticises his- or herself by criticising the other. This struggle between partners in the dialogue is what Karl Jaspers has called a struggle by love or a loving struggle. In this dialogue we criticise each other because we love each other and because our criticism focusses on ourselves as well as on others. This criticism is a way of clarifying how the good life can be realized and how the understanding of differences can help to overcome difficulties in practicing the good life.

The dialogue of civilizations mainly takes place on the first three levels but it also aims at the dialogue on the fourth and deepest level where human beings can find a common world history and a common world-view as if they — despite all differences — constitute one big family and in which they can confirm the dignity and integrity of each other.

4. Indifference and commitment

True dialogue is not compatible with indifference towards practices and norms which function as oppressions of people or certain groups of people. This indifference is not a way of respecting the other and establishing a dialogue. On the contrary, dialogue of civilizations implies commitment to liberation of people from every form of oppression, whether in one's own civilization or in another.

Tolerance has sometimes been taken to mean that every civilization is a closed world, which cannot be touched by criticism from outside. Thus, it is claimed that all behaviour is allowed and acceptable as a practice of civilization if it belongs to a custom observed by a majority of that civilization. But this would mean that there is no universal moral and no global ethos, and that a moral is only justifiable in the group where it expresses a tradition of customs and beliefs. So belonging to one culture you should not really be able or allowed to criticise what is going on in another culture.

In fact, this indifference toward others is no true respect for the other. It is rather a way of giving up a dialogue through which we can learn something of one another. The argument goes as follows: If I am not involved in the moral of the other, I can claim that the other should not break into my customs and my moral behaviour. My claim that I do not have to teach the other anything means that I should not and cannot learn anything from the other. So indifference implies not only that you do not interfere in the moral life of the other, but also that you protect yourself against any educational interference from outside in your own life.

Is tolerance such an indifference? Not necessarily. True tolerance is not to accept every cruelty and every offence that might be done against a human being, if only that being belongs to another tradition and another culture than my own. True tolerance is the attitude, which allows every human being to express whatever opinion it desires or to make whatever action it wishes provided that this opinion or this action does not fundamentally violate the dignity and the integrity of any human being.

But not only should tolerance go hand in hand with a denouncement of violation of fundamental human rights, but it should also not exclude a criticism of less violent oppression in customs and practices, such as gender discrimination or religious discrimination. In an active
dialogue there is a real concern for the other, en effort for bringing about the good life to humanity as a whole.

Any criticism of opinions and actions in other cultures must first be directed against one's own culture. It cannot be taken seriously if it is not applied as self-criticism. For instance, if we Western philosophers criticize the speculative thought of Kitaro Nishida, such as Augustin Berque has done so well, we must also criticize what is similar in our own philosophical tradition. Berque mentioned Heidegger, and Hegel might be even more relevant for such a criticism.

II. Conclusive Recommendations
My conclusion can be formulated as recommendations in the following five statements:

(1) The dialogue of civilizations should take the form of learning about historical experiences of values and beliefs of the others.

(2) The encounter and dialogue of different civilizations with particular ethics implies listening to others in openness and willingness to accept criticism of one's own moral and legal norms.

(3) Criticism of norms observed in other civilizations should not be formulated without having been directed against similar norms in one's own culture, for instance concerning gender oppression or religious intolerance.

(4) Dialogue in learning and criticism should aim at an ethical globalisation in which every civilization maintains autonomy and integrity while at the same time contributing to creating a humanity seen as one big family, a family sharing — despite great differences — a common historical life, and showing mutual respect of the other.

(5) In the dialogue of civilizations we should not forget that we are only at the beginning of a long way of intercultural discussion and life together before we can say whether we have a common ethos. Encounters between cultures and meetings like the present conference is nothing compared to what lies ahead, that is if we do wish to understand our different beliefs and world-views and enable a life together in true tolerance.