UNU Workshop on
“The Contribution of Ethics to the Dialogue of Civilizations”
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OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Promoting dialogue among civilizations: Issues in Ethics

While “science” is the common tool for the advancement of civilizations and the community of human beings as a whole, the “media” are an intermediary between different cultures and civilizations, and “education” provides the individual with the tools for understanding oneself and others, “ethics” refers to both what distinguishes civilizations, and to the linkage between them.

An ethical approach to the dialogue of civilizations

The ethical dimension of the dialogue of civilizations is twofold. Both dimensions are equally important and mutually re-enforcing. First, from a value-oriented point of view, ethics in the dialogue of civilizations refers to the strive for identifying and understanding the values and concepts on which human life is based:

- The objective of such dialogue is not to arrive at a consensus about the legitimacy of specific values, but to learn to understand and respect different concepts and norms of human value systems. No cultural value system is universally legitimate; rather, each derives a relative legitimacy from its social, political, religious, historical context.

- In order to effectively engage in such an exchange on the spiritual and practical principles underlying the perceptions, judgments and behavior of members of specific societies, it is essential that all parties to the dialogue interact on the basis of mutual respect and tolerance and support the notion of universal equality of all human beings.
Second, on a more pragmatic level, ethics represents the search for principles of conduct to organize the interaction of individuals or specific groups of people in a non-discriminatory and non-violent manner:

- Inter-civilizational dialogue is not only a subject for theoretical, philosophical analysis, and should therefore not be confined to scholarly conferences. Neither should it be limited to a process within one individual in the sense of a scholar engaging in comparative cultural and religious studies. Instead, dialogue should become the concern of all people, individually and collectively. To this end, arenas for dialogue should be created on the local, regional, national and international levels.

- At the same time, dialogue skills should be nurtured in every sphere of society, including an awareness of the fact that more often than not perceived disparities in values are largely based on differences in language and terminology. In the process of inter-civilizational dialogue, key terms and concepts will gradually come to be referred to in a language and terminology understood by all.

- In many instances, it will prove helpful to appoint a mediator in the process of the dialogue of civilizations to guide and coordinate the exchange of different perspectives and to explore the common ground among them. Each dialogue should also be evaluated afterwards to identify its constructive and destructive elements. If guided thoughtfully and effectively, inter-civilizational dialogue can become a creative and reliable means for conflict prevention and resolution.

*Ethics as a subject for dialogue*

In the past, people have mostly been motivated by commercial or political interests to engage in inter-civilizational dialogues. To promote peaceful coexistence, however, it is necessary to extend inter-civilizational encounters to discourses about ethics:

- Through such exchanges on cultural, religious, political, social values and norms distinctions between various ethical and moral systems can be fruitfully contrasted. At the same time, common ethical concepts and principles will become apparent, raising people’s awareness of convergences in ideas about human dignity, justice, freedom and equality across different ethical systems. This awareness of common ideas will ultimately increase the chance of containing power struggles masquerading as religious, ethnic or cultural conflicts well before they turn into violent conflicts.
- An inter-civilizational dialogue about ethics is also mutually enriching, encouraging sincere self-reflection and discourse with the other in a non-hostile atmosphere. Eventually, such interaction may lead to the partial mutual adoption of certain ethical concepts and principles among different cultural systems.

**Differentiating between what was, what is, and what ought to be**

In the dialogue about the ethical foundations of different civilizations and cultures, it is essential to at all times make explicit if one refers to past or present, real or ideal systems of values and norms. Normative ethical discourse is important in defining the ethical aspirations of society, and an inter-civilizational exchange about these concepts of ideal human behavior will be at the centre of shaping the values and norms of future world society. For a better mutual understanding of the motivations behind present-time thinking and action, however, it will be fruitful to thoroughly explore and discuss the values and norms, traditions and social conditions actually at work in influencing worldviews in different societies today.

**Overcoming static notions of culture and civilizations**

There is a tendency to depict civilizations, or cultures, as closed systems, independent from other civilizations or cultures and with firm and static underlying value systems. In order to promote cooperation and peaceful conflict resolution, the challenge is to overcome the urge to define civilizations, cultures, and – ultimately – “self” by means of dissociation. An ethical dialogue of civilizations has an important function in the process of learning to appreciate oneself and one’s own cultural background without the need to “demonize” others. In their quest to learn from others, people are guided by passionate emotions, including courage, friendship and love. Goodwill among people is at the core of any meaningful dialogue, together with the acceptance of the fact that human beings are not complete or fulfilled the way they are but can acquire a deeper understanding of themselves and enrich their lives through interaction with others.
2. History of civilizational dialogue

Taking a long-term view to understanding civilizations
The study of the history of religions from a comparative perspective reveals astounding incidences of common notions and concepts, even if they are expressed in different terms or carry a different weight in each religion. In Buddhism and Islam, for example, the basic principles of the relationship between man and god evolve around quite similar concepts. The historical exploration of the evolution of religious thinking can therefore contribute greatly to a better understanding of how different people perceive their humanity – which, again, is the essence of ethics.

Encounters versus dialogue
From an analysis of past inter-civilizational encounters, three ethical elements can be extracted: firstly, a common interest to engage in an exchange across cultural or civilizational boundaries, based on curiosity about the differences perceived in the other culture or civilization; secondly, a sound recognition and understanding of other cultures and civilizations; and thirdly, mutual respect among different civilizations or cultural groups. Only where the latter was prevalent have inter-civilizational encounters resulted in actual dialogue. Forced exchanges between civilizations, in particular if based on the economic dominance of one civilization over the other, have little potential to develop into a meaningful dialogue.

Beyond the politics of historiography
To arrive at a sound and just understanding of the history of civilizations and of the encounters that have taken place between them, it is necessary to conduct a systematic worldwide survey documenting the development of past inter-civilizational exchanges. Such a survey should focus on exploring in detail the reasons why some encounters have been successful, while others failed or had detrimental consequences for the parties involved. On this basis, it will be possible to draw conclusions for a better dialogue in the future. A historiography which aims at creating frames of reference for nationalism by demonizing others, or for the pre-eminence of one culture by focusing on what is “exotic” in other civilizations and cultures, is unsuitable for this task. Instead, historiography should more actively strive to link up
with the social sciences to translate historical lessons learned from failed dialogues into monitoring systems of major risk factors to prevent conflicts in the future.

*Ethics and religions*

In the past, religion used to be at the centre of value systems. Within the present process of globalization, however, norms and values are changing so rapidly in many societies that religious institutions are no longer perceived by all to be able to provide sufficiently adequate and timely frames of reference. In many countries, this has resulted in a shift toward non-institutionalized ethical systems: Rather than formalized religious principles and prescriptions, people are looking for alternative ethical concepts and principles to live by. Ethics, therefore, together with religion is an essential tool to help maintain the sustainability of world society.

3. **Multicultural society and cultural transformation**

*Multicultural societies can be a learning ground for inter-civilizational dialogue*

The co-existence of different cultural and social groups in today’s societies, as well as the increasingly rapid movement of people and information across cultural and civilizational borders, offers a great opportunity to promote inter-civilizational dialogue. By living and working together and by jointly organizing their societies, members of different cultural groups have a chance to, and are in fact forced to, learn to better understand each other and to appreciate their differences as well as the commonalities between them. This is in particular true for children, who have shown in experiments that they are well capable of firmly establishing their self-identity while understanding and appreciating both differences and commonalities with regard to others.

*Establishing diversity within common boundaries*

As a concept as well as a policy, multiculturalism can have two opposite consequences: On the one hand, it can be a source of enrichment if it creates a social or cultural space in which inter-cultural communication takes place. On the other hand, if specific cultural groups within a society are used as the object of “demonization” in processes of dissociation, it can lead to the marginalization of these
groups within the national or international community. To facilitate the former, it is necessary to give room to diversity while clearly defining the basic rules of interaction. From this perspective, the current process of moving away from the idea of “assimilation” when conceptualizing the inclusion of different cultural groups in a given society to the concept of “integration”, which accepts cultural differences with regard to the way in which people organize their lives while assuming the general acceptance by all of the basic norms underlying the respective society, should be accelerated.

Importance of knowledge acquisition and production
To effectively participate in society, it is important to know its rules, to be able to express one’s desires and to be capable of ensuring that these are properly reflected in political decision making processes. It is clear, therefore, that in order to prevent the marginalization of certain social or cultural groups along with the “mainstreaming” of others, it is essential that all groups within a society have equal access to information and knowledge, with regard to both their production and their dissemination. In present day societies, however, this is not the norm. An important task is to restore this imbalance by building bridges between those currently at the centre of information and knowledge creation and exchange and those left out of these processes, whereby the emphasis should be on the quality of access to knowledge, and not just its frequency. As language is an essential tool for the exchange of knowledge, one of the challenges in this process will be to find a common language while at the same time preserving the languages unique to each civilization and cultural group.

Bridging the gaps with a dialogue of ethics
Ethical dialogue has a crucial function in integrating multicultural societies:
- Once the ethical assumptions underlying much of human behavior are made explicit, more often than not will it become clear that perceived divisions are the result of social, political or economic circumstances rather than differences in world view.
- An ethical approach to the integration of different cultural groups within a society also helps to stress the relevance of each individuals’ or groups’ responsibility and accountability for the decisions they make and the actions they undertake or refuse to carry out.
- An emphasis on ethics also underscores the importance of the concept of solidarity, lies at the basis of any attempt to restore the balance between the “haves” and “have-nots.”

4. Asian perspectives

Avoiding stereotypes
The oft-made over-simplifying distinction between “Asian” and “Western” values illustrates the necessity of strictly avoiding generalizations when discussing ethical systems. Such generalizations not only ignore the diversity of value systems within any world region and also within countries, but also the fact that cultures are neither self-enclosed nor static, with the norms and values informing the thinking and acting of people within a specific culture in constant flux. Generalizations should therefore be avoided both when referring to other world regions and when referring to one’s one cultural sphere.

Questioning the ethics of authenticity
An exploration of specific ethical concepts prevalent in Asia illustrates the usefulness of comparing different ethical systems when searching for solutions to global problems: In today’s world, where decisions and actions taken in one part of the world can effect the choices of people in other parts of the world in ways and to an extent largely unknown before, human security will be sustainable only if people become more aware of their interdependence and the dependence of humankind on a healthy environment. Ethical concepts developed in Asia can be useful in helping people to realize the limits of individualism and to rediscover a sense of community. While most ethical systems in Asia and in Europe contain elements of individualism and community formation, the Confucian perspective on personhood offers a valuable alternative to the “Western” ethics of authenticity, which stresses that the authentic self has to be discovered and exposed by each person for herself or himself. In Confucian thinking, however, the self is understood as being at the center of human relationships. The better one understands these relationships and one’s own position within in the concentric circle of relationships surrounding oneself, the stronger becomes one’s self-awareness. Such a viewpoint, which emphasizes the
interdependence among human beings as well as between human beings and their natural environment, can be helpful to cultivate a stronger sense of human responsibility and solidarity.

5. Universality versus particularity?

Universality as a regulative idea

While, from an ethical point of view, a consensus on the necessity and usefulness of an exchange of ideas is a prerequisite for inter-civilizational dialogue, universal values are not, and do not need to be, a given to the participants in the dialogue from the outset. Rather, they can be acquired or worked toward through just such a dialogue. Universality should be perceived as a regulative idea, which serves as a guideline and suggests a certain direction for inter-civilizational dialogue.

Developing a global ethos...

While the dialogue of civilizations does not, and should not, aim at creating a fully universal value system, it is nevertheless desirable – and feasible – that it will contribute to developing a feeling of joint responsibility for future generations, based on people’s increased awareness about the common ethical principles underlying their specific value systems and the common cultural features and similarities in values among different civilizations. Such a “global ethos” will highlight the basic desires and aspirations all humans have in common and as such, in a very practical way, will form the basis for better international cooperation in solving our common problems.

…in an all-encompassing way

The process of developing a global ethos should be open and inclusive, carefully containing attempts at “globalizing” the specific value systems of those currently in power politically or economically. Any social or cultural group should be able to join the dialogue and contribute to the process of defining the global ethos. Here, privileged nations and dominant groups have the responsibility to assist those in a weaker position to participate in the dialogue, by taking the lead in creating the fora for such dialogue within as well as among civilizations and by providing marginalized
states and groups sufficient access to the information and knowledge necessary to make themselves properly heard in the dialogue.

Learning to cope with diversity

Diversity is a pre-condition of the present world. To engage in a meaningful dialogue across civilizational boundaries, it is important to conceive this diversity as an asset, and not as a threat to cultural identity. To nurture such understanding and awareness, education curricula should be revised in such a way that students learn to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to appreciate, rather than fear, the fact that many different value systems co-exist. Two ways of learning should be included in school curricula for this purpose. One is cognitive learning about others through knowledge acquisition. The other is emotional learning through social and cultural learning. These two learning processes should enhance students’ respect for others’ opinions and their involvement with others through a dialogue that does not demand the others’ conformity to their worldviews. To lay the basis for such learning, ethics should be re-introduced as a mandatory subject in formal education, with a particular focus on comparative ethics.

Participants:

Karim BENAMMAR, Kobe University
Els CLAEYS, United Nations University
David HEYD, Hebrew University, Israel
Ryuichi IDA, Kyoto University
Tomonobu IMAMICHI, Sapientia University, Japan
Yersu KIM, Korean National Commission for UNESCO
Masaya KOBAYASHI, Chiba University
Iwao KOBORI, United Nations University
Georges KUTUKDJIAN, UNESCO
Kosei MORIMOTO, Todaiji-Temple, Nara
Hisae NAKANISHI, Nagoya University
Kurt PAWLIK, University of Hamburg
Birgit PONIATOWSKI, United Nations University
Modjtaba SADRIA, Chuo University
Justin THORENS, Switzerland