UNU Workshop on
The Role of Leadership in Dialogue Among Civilisations
17-18 June 2001

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Group
The discussion group, comprising fourteen participants drawn from Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, joined in a two-day workshop to understand the role that leadership might play in facilitating a dialogue among civilisations. The group recognised that Huntington’s seminal article of 1993 generated an on-going debate that continues to find resonance both within academia and high political office today. Although the ‘dialogue’ may have reached a conceptual climax in recent years, in some ways a more substantive dialogue had already been taking place within the world’s metropolitan centres. The proclamation of a dialogue among civilizations, therefore, did not mark a radical departure from the abrasions of urban life, but rather connoted a new approach to international relations at the global level.

This dual persona of civilizational dialogue, as a political concept (theoretical discussion) and as a living practice (inner-city co-existence), could blur the clarity required for making a dialogue among civilizations tangible and meaningful. Thus, any dialogue for the future should operate both at the macro-level (global tectonics) and the micro-level (inner-city life). The synergy of the two approaches might produce a critical link between the local and the global, thereby lending certain credence to the operationalization of the concept.
1. Promoting dialogue among civilizations

Leadership was recognised as one of the key variables in making a dialogue among civilisations meaningful. The leadership, comprising leaders from all sectors/levels of society, would provide both a philosophical and physical meeting ground for the dialogue to take place. The role of leadership can play a critical role in facilitating the dialogue and connecting the mutual interests and concerns between and among the various civilisations/communities.

The role of leadership in the civilizational dialogue can be seen in promoting understanding, creating an enabling environment, providing information and ensuring participation across various sectors of society to create common ground and encouraging leaders as models.

Leaders, whether located at the global, regional, national or local level, carry the responsibility for guiding their constituencies to success. As representatives they are usually invested with the authority to discuss and negotiate on behalf of their constituencies. The organic link between leadership and constituency, and then leadership and leadership (of different communities), can provide the axis through which a meaningful dialogue can take place.

For leadership to take an active and constructive role in the dialogue, it has to commit itself to the principles and practice of civilizational dialogue. Leadership should embody the underlying values of the dialogue, including tolerance and understanding, and this ought to inform the relationship between leadership and their constituency. From these building blocks, and by practising participatory leadership, leaders of civilisations/communities would encourage and lead their own constituency to operate beyond their own cultural context. This would enable communities within heterogeneous societies to identify their commonalities with partner communities, and at the same time realise the differences that generate tensions within the society.
2. Leadership and the history of civilizational dialogue

It is not easy to determine the extent of dialogue that existed between civilizations throughout history, or indeed even whether such a dialogue has occurred at all. If ‘dialogue’ is taken to mean a conversation between two persons or two societies based on perceived equality, respect, and a genuine interest in mutual enlightenment, then history is by no means replete with examples of this kind. Rather the tendency has been towards inter-civilizational monologues.

History does reveal some degree of genuine dialogue, but it has taken quite different form over the millennia. It is possible to discern the dialogue as being undertaken in two major eras, namely:

- the ‘historic past’ and
- the ‘very modern age’.

In the past dialogue may be seen as having been generated and maintained in four ways – involving both citizens and leaders in their different ways. They may be described as:

(a) individual wanderers -- ‘transmitters through space’;
(b) individual philosophers -- ‘transmitters over time’;
(c) potentate interest;
(d) intra-polity strategy.

In the very modern age – that is to say, over the past decade, a fifth type of dialogue may be seen as underway. It can best be described as:

(e) ‘global tectonics’.

**Individual Wanderers**

Some monks reached out across civilizations with a view to bringing esoteric knowledge back home for domestic consumption. Those individuals may have had important patrons, but their endeavours reflected individual courage, fortitude and often diplomatic tact. Fa Xian travelled to India and Sri Lanka in 402 CE returning to China a decade later with a large collection of early Buddhist sanskrit texts. His translation of these and his account of the journey provide important documentation of the beginning of relations between China and India. Yuang Chwang, most famous
of the Chinese Buddhist monks, also visited India, discoursing with the scholars of King Harsha’s court in the 6th century CE. Marco Polo is the most celebrated wanderer known to the West, and his dialogue at the court of Kublai Khan is an example of early contact between Chinese and Western civilizations.

Individual Philosophers

Of huge potential for inter-civilizational dialogue over successive centuries was the work of neo-platonist philosopher, Hypatia, in the 5th c. BCE. The potential she had for bridging paganism and Christianity was unlimited, for the Library of Alexandria which she headed contained the greatest collation of human knowledge before her time or since, until the very modern age of internet. Her death at the hands of a Christian mob heralded the extinction of scientific erudition of the times and the onset of the ‘dark ages’ in the West, leaving to chance the ability of subsequent civilizations to preserve what remained of the storehouse of knowledge in that Library.

Perhaps more than any other civilization Islam has acted as the fulcrum of history in the transmission of knowledge from the ancient to the modern world. The most notable figures in this respect were Ibn Sina (known to the West as Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes). Ibn Sina, Persian philosopher of the 11th c. BCE, completed an encyclopedia that encompassed logic, psychology, metaphysics and natural science, parts of which were translated into Latin for the Western world. Ibn Rushd, Muslim philosopher of 12th century CE Spain, produced commentaries on Aristotle which greatly influenced the philosophy of medieval Christianity and helped Western civilization to reach back to classical Greece.

Potentate Interest

It needs to be judged the extent to which these pursuits by powerful potentates were the result of personal interest or conscious statecraft. Napoleon, for example, used to surround himself with the intellectual elite of Europe, enjoying the brilliance of minds such as Goethe’s. But Napoleon scarcely engaged in a dialogue among civilizations.

Intra-Polity Strategy

The question remains, however, whether any society, led by any individual, has in the past reached out with a conscious initiative to engage in peaceful dialogue with
another civilization to learn the essential truths of the other, in a spirit of respect and genuine interest. There have been, it seems, some isolated cases of this. But such dialogues have been initiated as part of a conscious statecraft to keep a polity together – as always a mixture of philosophical enlightenment and realpolitik. In these cases, a large political state – empire, perhaps -- had been riven with inter-civilizational strife; and the emperor had seen an opportunity to keep the polity together through inter-civilizational dialogue.

A distinction needs to be made, however, between ‘conversion’ and ‘arbitration’. The most notable cases of conversion, Ikhnaton, Ashoka and Constantine, were examples of individual changes of personal conviction. Both Ikhnaton and Constantine followed with a degree of revolutionary zeal that eschewed dialogue.

Ashoka, however was different. Following his conversion to Buddhism after a career of sweeping military conquests in the 3rd century BCE, he published a series of ‘rock edicts’ applying Buddhism resolutely throughout the Mauryan Empire. Other edicts repeatedly enjoin religious tolerance. One must give alms to Brahmans as well as to Buddhist priests; one must not speak ill of other men’s faiths. The King announces that all his subjects are his beloved children, and that he will not discriminate against any of them because of their diverse creeds. Rock Edict XII is especially notable.

Over a millennium later, Indian Mogul emperor Akbar underwent a similar change of heart in the 17th century CE that affected history. After forcefully expanding his rule over the whole of modern India and beyond, he came to rely less and less on force for his legitimacy. Near the end of his reign, concerned by the religious divisions in his kingdom and the risk they posed to his legacy, Akbar strove to promulgate a new religion, containing in simple form the essentials of the warring faiths. The drama provides an astonishing glimpse of the vision, yet hubris, of one of the greatest and most enlightened rulers in history.

Several Chinese emperors also underwent similar transmogrifications. In the Tang dynasty, 7th century CE Emperor T’ai Tsung first murdered his brothers, then reconquered those neighbouring territories that had thrown off Chinese rule after the fall of the Han. Suddenly he grew tired of war and returned to his capital Ch’ang-an,
‘giving himself to the ways of peace’ and voraciously studying the works of Confucius. Buddhist monks arrived in great numbers from India, and Chinese Buddhists, like Yuan Chwang, travelled freely to India to study the new religion of China at its source. Missionaries came to China to preach Zoroastrianism and Nestorian Christianity; the Emperor welcomed them, gave them protection and freedom, and exempted their temples from taxation.

Almost a millennium later during the Ming dynasty, K’ang-hsi (1661-1722 CE) gave China the most prosperous, peaceful and enlightened reign in the nation’s history. It was without doubt the largest, richest, and most populous empire of its time. K’ang-hsi ruled it with a wisdom and justice that filled with envy the educated subjects of his contemporaries Aurangzeb and Louis XIV. Under his patronage an appreciation of literature and scholarship flourished. He tolerated all the religions, studied Latin under the Jesuits, and tolerated the presence of European merchants in his ports.

These four statesmen, two from India, two from China, are thus here depicted as the best examples of leadership for inter-civilizational dialogue over the millennia.

‘Global Tectonics’

The above examples, however, are all historical experiences. Until recently the world, with its full panoply of civilizational rise and fall, was undergoing a process of political maturation. Civilizations lived sufficiently far apart that dialogue, while being a moral prescription, was not a categorical imperative. In the past those leaders who did initiate a ‘dialogue’ did so within the confines of their own civilization, and essentially for their own civilization. However bold and visionary their actions may have been, the implications of what they were doing were constrained in terms of geographical and political import.

Over the past half century, the world has become a ‘global village’; for the first time humanity is living in a closed global system where technology is tectonically forcing people together, to interact from a backdrop of cultures that, by and large, had hitherto been allowed to remain separate. In such a brave new world, a proper understanding of, and respect for, other civilizations is a prerequisite to global harmony and stability. Today’s world is qualitatively different from the ‘historic past’. The new ‘village’
requires global co-operation and a cultural and civilizational empathy not only between two adjacent civilizations but between all civilizations on a multilateral scale.

The initiative of the past few years, then, has been a response, not to spontaneous impulse born of pure curiosity, but to a global imperative – caused by the ‘global melting pot’. The dialogue, accordingly, is multilateral as well as being an imperative, and as such it is ultimately challenging.

The times call for a dialogue initiated by contemporary leaders who show an acute appreciation of this. The initiative taken in the late-1990s by Iran’s President Khatami through the United Nations of a dialogue among civilizations is such an example. Such statecraft reflects all that is enlightened in the policies and initiatives of the rulers of previous ages.

In the past year, Pope John Paul II’s forays across the theological divide between Christian Catholicism and Orthodoxy, and across faiths from Christianity to Judaism and Islam, rank among the very finest and boldest of initiatives in the history of dialogue among civilizations. His apology for past misdeeds of the Christian Inquisition, and his visit to Judaic temples and Islamic mosques, are without precedent in the annals of religious discourse and action.

This is not to postulate that all deeds and actions by such leaders are beyond critique. Both leaders have been criticized, often from perspectives reflecting cultural or religious subjectivity. But it is to say that the overall effect of the courageous initiatives they have taken are positive steps for inter-civilizational empathy and understanding.

Echoes of intra-polity strategies similar to those identified earlier may be found in the calls for toleration of immigrants by modern European statesmen such as Germany’s Rickard von Weisaeccker and Czech Republic’s Vaclav Havel. But they focus more on intra-national unity rather than the ‘global vision’ that Khatami and John Paul are aspiring to offer.
3. Multicultural society and cultural transformation

The leadership of all communities should be sensitised to the consequences of ‘exclusion’ from mainstream society. Tolerance and empathy should form a link between the leaderships of the different communities living within one society, and this can be achieved through dialogue. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela played a historic role in cultural coexistence of diverse races and religions by promoting multicultural society and respecting differences.

Leadership should recognise and define cultural transformation to its constituency. It should realise that cultural transformation is an on-going process, and it is one that cannot be avoided. Thus, leadership ought to promote the positive outcome of cultural transformation, and celebrate the contribution to be derived from diversity.

The leadership of each community should work together to build an infrastructure that supports cultural diversity, and education is one key element. Education can provide the key to unlocking the challenges of cultural transformation, and the leadership should ensure that curricula reflect the transformations taking place in society. As part of that process, leadership should also recognise the multiplicity of links that exist between global and local issues. Hence, constituencies might subscribe to more than one leadership, one in the local context and one in the global context.

Global and Local Connectivity

Contemporary living has been framed though the process of globalisation; global and local now interact instantly via the global economy, telecommunications, climate change, religion, and migration. Humankind has been irrevocably connected by a multiple process of intellectual, technological, spiritual and physical migration. Yet the benefits of globalisation have yet to be realised on a global scale. The macro-injustices often attributed to the uneven benefits of globalisation can also be detected in the world’s civilisational microcosms in the cities. The link between the ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ is becoming increasingly pronounced since the tensions present at the global level are being readily translated at the local level.
Recent tensions in the UK are a case in point, reflecting the process of interaction between communities and generations. Such developments need not be characterized as solely negative, however; they represent simply the outcome of an imbalanced system operating within certain cities that has served to marginalize Asian youth and undermined the financial confidence of the white community. Indeed it has become a central challenge of global leadership to address the ‘youth sub-culture’ around the world today. Problems of this kind, however, can be addressed through inclusion, empowerment and with problem-solving techniques.

The attrition of co-existence has produced many substantive cleavages within emerging societies. But there are many examples where community leaders have overcome the civilisational breakdown and satisfied the needs of their communities within a common framework.

4. Leadership Styles: the Asian perspective

Asian leadership styles are constructed around certain key qualities, and Ikeda has noted one of these qualities to be the worldview that places precedence on harmony over confrontation and on unity over fragmentation. The other is the humanistic thinking that seeks the best available solutions through actual practice rather than a rigid adherence to theory.

Other such qualities include moral authority; tradition; the centrality of family; trust; and the wisdom derived from practice. These values would make a significant contribution to civilisational dialogue, as they could form the cornerstone of the dialogue. The values derived from various religious, spiritual and cultural sources in Asian context have made remarkable impact on the statecraft, art, architecture, tradition and organization of societies of the people of the region.

5. Universality and Particularity

The ‘very modern’ world of inter-civilisational dialogue will witness myriad efforts to promote empathy and understanding among cultures, in which President Khatami and Pope John Paul II will be seen as simply the precursors. The notion of ‘global human
values’ and a ‘global ethics’ has been brought onto the international community’s agenda over the past decade or so.

In 1993 the Second Conference of the World’s Religions was called, devoting its efforts to developing a ‘global ethics’ for all of humanity. It failed to produce an agreed text but accomplished something substantive nonetheless. The World Commission on Culture and Development provided some insight on the question. Other leading authorities have also been working in the 1990s on the closely-related question of global values, most notably the Commission on Global Governance. There is even talk within responsible intellectual circles of a ‘world civilization’ and of a ‘new civilization.

The collision or convergence between universal and particular values, an occurrence taking place between civilisations and within inner-cities, can be addressed and embraced both by global and local leaders. Their tasks have been connected through the prevalence of globalisation.

Contemporary leadership needs to work towards ensuring that globalisation does not only serve one key constituency. Furthermore, globalisation should not reflect the triumph of one ideology, cultural or economic system over another. It is the duty of leadership to ensure that the cultural dynamics of globalisation preserve and promote diversity, and that convergence does not amount to an homogenisation of the world’s cultures.

The fluctuation between universal and particular should be undertaken on a step-by-step approach. The convergence of values, a process of ebb and flow, need not preclude key values, but rather signify the relevance of particular values to each community. Leadership would need to play a crucial role in preserving those particular values, whilst recognising the fluidity of common values and incorporating them into the broader society. In fact, leadership can play a crucial role in inspiring, motivating people to change, preserve and adapt in the ‘converging’ process of civilisational dialogue to cope with the forces of globalization.
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