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A Conversation Between Ahmed and Maria

Ahmed: In 1998, President Khatami of the Islamic Republic of Iran suggested that, “If humanity, at the threshold of the new millennium, devoted all efforts to institutionalizing dialogue, and replacing hostility and confrontation with discourse and understanding, it would leave an invaluable legacy for the benefit of future generations.”¹ What do you think Maria?

Maria: I think that the Dialogue among Civilizations can make an important contribution in preparing the peoples of the world to face the challenges of tomorrow. Communication between different cultures and religions is crucial in creating and promoting understanding among nations. We need to talk.

Ahmed: I think it’s much broader than that. Dialogue can encompass more than just verbal communication. I see dialogue as way to facilitate understanding through many kinds of sharing, not only the communication of ideas and beliefs, but also the sharing of cultural traditions such as food, art, music and dance.

Maria: Your conception of dialogue seems to suggest that dialogue does not occur so much between cultures and civilizations as it does between individual persons. In addition, I think that the notion of intercivilizational dialogue suggests that we are really one multi-cultural civilization and that we are each responsible for contributing to the creation of a dialogue.²

Ahmed: Well, I believe that we are essentially one diverse global family and that our success, as in all families, depends on our ability and willingness to establish communication and sharing, and to respond to change. I can understand though why some civilizations may have reservations about participating in a global family that they feel has excluded them and ignored their concerns for so many years.

Maria: Do you think that might be changing? I’ve noticed that the recent events in the United States have led to a recognition among many Western countries of the need to address the kind of violence and destruction that has been occurring in so many other places for decades. With such a tragedy comes the opportunity to recognize the necessity for discourse and understanding, and to acknowledge that no individual member of our global family should live in an atmosphere of terror and violence.

Ahmed: I suppose it’s possible that the Dialogue among Civilizations could contribute to improving the lives and well-being of individuals by helping to create a society

based on mutual understanding and tolerance. This promotes both respect for one another and ultimately, peace among nations.

Maria: In addition, an open dialogue suggests that we ought to embrace our religious and cultural differences, rather than see them as a threat to our individual existence.

Ahmed: But don't you think that diversity can be a threat?

Maria: What do you mean? I'm not sure I understand what you're saying.

Ahmed: Well, everyone feels threatened when their differences are not understood.

Maria: But perhaps diversity is primarily only a threat where there is a lack of willingness to communicate and understand those differences?

Ahmed: You know, willingness might be the key factor. Look at the two of us for example. We often don't agree but we keep talking and learning from each other.

Maria: I think that dialogue not only allows us to acknowledge our differences and to comprehend why they exist, but also often leads us to recognize our similarities. In fact, I would argue that people share more similarities than one might initially think.

Ahmed: Such as?

Maria: Well, I believe that there are common universal desires among the peoples of the world that transcend boundaries of religion, culture and nationality. Such as the desire for security, for hope, freedom, choice, love and equality. Recognizing our similarities as well as our differences through a process of dialogue only further contributes to our understanding of one another.

Ahmed: Don't forget that everyone has the right to have access to food, shelter and clean water too. I wonder if it's even possible to create a true dialogue while inequality between civilizations still exists?

Maria: I'm not sure. However, I think that it is possible that the Dialogue among Civilizations, through communication and sharing, could begin to address this imbalance in our global family.

Ahmed: Maybe. I think that dialogue can work towards the prevention of hostilities, conflicts and violations of basic human rights. Many past conflicts in history have been the direct result of a lack of dialogue, and thus of understanding between different groups. In many ways, war is the absence of dialogue.

Maria: And wars do not offer resolutions insomuch as they appear to create winners and

losers... although we all essentially lose when we engage in conflict. Moreover, hostility and violence encourage only more hostility and violence, whereas dialogue creates understanding that can lead to the actual resolution of the problem.

Ahmed: I believe that humanity's reliance on the use of war and violence throughout history as a means to resolve conflict has been its greatest failure. It has claimed millions of innocent lives and resulted in such great human tragedies as the Holocaust. I often wonder about the other human tragedies that have gone unnoticed...

Maria: History has no shortage of instances of humanity at its worst. I believe, however, that the Dialogue among Civilizations may allow us to witness humanity at its best. By instituting and maintaining such a dialogue, we could create a solid foundation of international and intercultural understanding and acceptance that would allow future generations to more effectively deal with the challenges of tomorrow.

Ahmed: Talking with you makes me feel hopeful that today's youth could be united in confronting both present and future challenges. There are so many complex global problems that we must face.

Maria: Such as terrorism, environmental threats and important issues relating to human conditions like poverty, famine and population health.

Ahmed: We also face challenges created as a result of conflict, such as the proliferation of landmines, refugee crises and violations of basic human rights.

Maria: I don't think we can deal with such challenges in isolation. We have to work together. It is more important now than ever that we unite as a global family in order to begin to address these problems. To fail to do so will be at our peril and ultimately, at the peril of our children.

Ahmed: And one of the most effective ways to unite is through dialogue.

Maria: Dialogue that sees our diversities not as a threat but as an opportunity to learn.

Ahmed: Dialogue that creates and promotes a culture of peace and peaceful co-existence.

Maria: Dialogue that prevents hostility and violence.

Ahmed: Dialogue that unites us in facing universal challenges.

Maria: The contributions of the Dialogue among Civilizations are endless.

Ahmed: Then let's get to work.

Maria: We already are Ahmed.

¹ President Khatami, September 21, 1998, United Nations General Assembly.

² David Wilkinson. "Studying the History of Intercivilizational Dialogues." [Online]. 20 September 2001.
<http://dialoguecentre.org/magazine.html>