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Unity Through Diversity

Introduction

All through the ages of history, across the spectrum of civilizations, human cultures tended to develop fundamentally in the form of monologues, that is people talked only with those who thought as they themselves did.

Nowadays, however, observing the misunderstanding, hostility and violence generated by cultural, ethnic and religious differences, humanity is beginning to move out of that *Age of Monologue* into the dawning *Age of Dialogue* believing that distinct values can inspire and unite, and not only divide and destroy.

What is meant by Dialogue among Civilizations?

The term refers to a bi-or-multi-lateral process in which people belonging to different cultures with different norms and traditions, *integrate* rather than *disintegrate*; that is they try to share their ideas and norms rather than to privilege one single cultural worldview or ideology upon the others. Ethically, *Dialogue among Civilizations* would mean that people give up the “will-to-power” for the “will-to-empathy and solidarity”.

The aim behind this complex process is not only to foster cross-cultural understanding, but rather a more ambitious one; namely to create a civilization that can benefit from the strengths, while simultaneously overcoming the weaknesses of all previous civilizations; a civilization in which multiplicity is respected while unity is achieved; a civilization more capable than ever to collectively face its challenges; a *civilization of love and peace*.

There is no doubt that the challenges facing humanity nowadays are both unprecedented and bizarre in the sense that no single nation can face them alone. Contemporary life has demonstrated repeatedly that solutions to these challenges reside in the creation of practical methods of collective global actions, something that could not be achieved without intercultural understanding.

Therefore, the question that should be imposed initially is whether these seemingly diverse worldviews could be really unified as a pre-step in facing their common challenges?

Unity beneath Diversity

Although diversity is one of the most evident phenomena in our world, perceiving humans as entirely diverse creatures obscures much of the whole picture. In fact, a critical examination of the distinct traditions and cultures developed throughout history, proves that there is a deeper common ground out of which all these diverse worldviews arose, and it wouldn't be difficult to conclude that the common source that produced these cultures is not the machine, but the human individual.

Believing in this fact would mean that there are values that are common to all cultures for they are rooted in the nature of humans. These values constitute the backbone of a global cross-cultural dialogue. Because such values are prevalent everywhere, they constitute the basis for fruitful and constructive dialogue proving that all cultures, though seemingly diverse, do have the potential to be combined.

Take the simple example of how people talk and behave in Egypt. Throughout its 7000 years of history, in addition to its unique and spectacular Pharaoh empire, the world's ancient civilization was influenced by the Greek, the Roman, the Arab- Islamic civilization, and lastly the British occupation. Amazingly, all these cultures and civilizations are apparent not only in the daily life of the ordinary Egyptian Man, but also in the Egyptian dialect itself; Egyptians do use Pharaoh, ancient Greek, Roman, English and Arabic words within the same sentence in a unique and impressive manner, providing a proof that all cultures do have the potential to be combined, while not privileging one upon the others.

However, can *Dialogue among Civilizations* really assist in resolving humanity's gravest problems, and what is so special about these challenges that makes *Dialogue among Civilizations* best appropriate for them?

Facing Humanity's Challenges

Walking through the battlefields of the Balkans, through the valleys of Kashmir, through the killing fields of Rwanda, and along the scarred streets of Beirut some years earlier, testify to the terrible destruction committed in the name of religion and culture. It has become apparent that the unwillingness to accept the *Other*, and resisting the evident concept of diversity have killed more people so far than nuclear bombs did.

Ethnic conflicts, however, are only the clearest manifestations of cross-cultural misunderstanding and hostility. The list still includes numerous other problems that humanity is unable to combat because of cross-cultural mistrust. Examples of such problems are abundant in today's small world, the world in which distances are disappearing and closer interaction is growing, the world in which a local crisis in one country could unfailingly and immediately threaten entire regions.

Organized crime, terrorism, racism, migration, climate change, environmental contamination; all these are problems that don't identify international borders, and therefore require global action and intra-state cooperation. A quick look at these problems, however, suggests that they all are to some extent value-laden ones. In other words, they are subject to

various interpretations in different cultures, and this conceptual diversity is, actually, what makes these problems hard to solve. However, if the different cultures, ideologies, and worldviews are closer to each other than they are today, to the extent that their visions of these crippling challenges are more solid, solving these problems would be definitely easier. And that is where cross-cultural dialogue takes the lead.

Dialogue among Civilizations can help resolve these problems through tackling their source through opening global civilized dialogue, through fostering clearer apprehension of the different cultures and religions, through helping people to awaken to their deeper common ground; their humanity.

Not only in cases of religious and ethnic confrontations can *Dialogue Among Civilizations* be of assistance, but rather in all fields of life where worldviews or differing perspectives collide: in inter-cultural relations, in situations where prejudice and bigotry produce violence, in our institutional and corporate lives where tensions arise as differing perspectives come into conflict.

Why the Youth?

To be effective, the focus of such a dialogue should be the youth, for the youth are less restricted by the negative feelings of hatred and hostility accumulated from the past, and at the same time, they have both the power and the will to build the future. They are tomorrow's teachers, doctors, engineers, leaders, and most important, tomorrow's fathers and mothers. If today's youth are more culturally open-minded than their parents were, tomorrow's youth would be even more tolerant.

Moreover, it is almost certain that the problems that the coming generations will be facing would be even more challenging than the ones we are facing today, problems that can never be approached with a world overwhelmed with distrust and misunderstanding. Believing in this, promotion of cross-cultural understanding becomes no more a noble ideal, but rather an imperative choice for survival.

Conclusion

As humanity moves into the Third Millennium, the time has come to take the power and promise of *Dialogue Among Civilizations* to a new level where it can make a difference in confronting the world's problems. For through intercultural dialogue, people come to confront the challenges of tomorrow by considering diversity not as a threat, but as an opportunity for betterment and growth.

“O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)).”¹

¹ Holy Qur'an, Surah (AL-HUJARAAT) : Ayah 013 .

