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The Whole World Needs the Whole World: Establishing a Framework for a Dialogue of Civilizations

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Introduction: Unity, Diversity and Hope

We are living in a world where borders have collapsed, as has our traditional conceptions of space, time and distance. Cultures and communities are exposed and interact with one another in unprecedented ways as a result of revolutions in information, and we are discovering that our fates and futures increasingly depend on one another, making mutual understanding, respect and cooperation essential to realizing the positive aspects of our growing interdependency. Our greater capacity for learning and our broadening familiarity with the foreign represents a powerful growth in knowledge and marks a turning point in human civilization.

This information revolution has set in motion two contradictory trends in the world: increasing localization, leading to self-assurance and the strengthening of each culture's own traditions, and globalization, which spans the sheer diversity of the human expression. This context defines the nature of our contact in a broader sense: through this growing awareness of our diversity lies our unmistakable unity: our humanity and our common values and needs. It is up to us, at this crucial time in our shared history, to determine how we will know and relate with each other, how we define and benefit from our relationship, and how we will cope together with the teeming diversity of our global community. Dialogue, as a new paradigm in global relations, is based on knowledge to achieve new knowledge, to see each other with different eyes, in a different light, looking together toward a shared future in a global community to make the world safe for diversity.

Why a Dialogue of Civilizations?

The need for a dialogue of civilizations is based on the recognition that our changing reality requires a new global ethic and a new perception of one another. Two of the world's most powerful civilizations have known each other

as deeply competitive rivals and adversaries reaching back through the historical memory and imagination of both.

The shared cultural roots joining Islam with the West are forgotten far too often. Although recently voiced (and frequently ill-conceived) opinions regarding a 'clash of civilizations' posit that Islam falls outside the Judeo-Christian and Hellenic cultural continuum, the reverse is in fact the case. Classical Islamic civilization was constructed out of Arab, Biblicist and Hellenic cultures, but cast a wider net by integrating Persian, Central Asia, as well as Indian components within its cultural synthesis. Historically, Islam is the true bridge between West and East.

Yet as each civilization pursued their own historical trajectories and encountered one another as rivals in competitive power politics, each retreated from the other to struggle with internal conflicts and questions, reducing the other to static images of threatening, unrelated, rival 'others'. Psychopathy operates at the level of symbols in order to generate a new system of meaning, divorced from larger material or spiritual understandings, and feeds on the need to address despair through fear. These simplified images allowed for a new relationship to be established based on power and control. A retreat to a cultural ghetto by any group, be it Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu, not only denies the rich diversity of the modern cultural experience, but also a rejection of responsibility for future generations. Retreat is one of two faces of fundamentalism, or as a pathology of culture that arises when a group takes a subset of basic tenets of a tradition, and either under pressure of insecurity (as in the case of today's Muslims), or in the pursuit of hegemony or total security (in the case of the West), uses them either to seal off others, or to maintain dominance.

Today, such relationships and the images they were built upon are no longer sustainable. Instead, as each struggles to find their place and identity in a globalized world, we are discovering that each has held many of solutions to the questions the other has long been asking. Dialogue is key to surfacing these 'hidden treasures'; once we are able to unlock the secrets of effective communication and pierce through the walls of misperception and mistrust we can gather these valuable insights, lessons and opportunities and enrich us both.

Islam and the West today are dangerously out of touch with one another, and misperceptions and mistrust have led to an ever-deepening estrangement. This relationship has only deteriorated since President Khatemi called in 1998 for a dialogue of civilizations, primarily because we still have not yet learned how to dialogue with one another, or what we hope to achieve in the process. The year 2001 was proclaimed by the United Nations as the Year of Civilizational Dialogue, and the ongoing, worsening tragedies experienced by both communities only underscore the urgency of conceptualizing the means of effective inter-cultural and inter-religions communication.

The Old Paradigm

In all conflict situations, people under stress react by reducing their own beliefs to a small, workable subset in order to fight and protect themselves, assuming a rigidity and defensiveness that implicitly closes off the ability to hear and communicate with others. If sought, however, conflicts can open up the space for understanding, cooperation, or at the very least, mutual respect. Most importantly, the West and Islam must move beyond reactive posturing and strategic maneuvering with one another, and this can only begin once a commitment to meaningful, sustained dialogue is engaged.

Islam is Not the Enemy of the West

Islam is not the enemy of the West. There is a lingering, pervasive belief in the West that Islamic values are inherently incompatible with Western ideals and goals. The West hears only the voices that are the loudest, and these are the ones who reject and openly despise them. They see only the anger from the Muslim and Arab world, which causes them to retreat into defensiveness and ignore the reasons which drive these passions. It becomes easier to believe that beliefs are irreconcilable and irrational, reinforced by these images of outrage that are propagated by a sensationalist media which thrives on such imagery. American media has often tended to portray the Islamic world (and various groups within it) solely through the prism of extremism and terrorism – so often, indeed, that some of those who attempt to debunk the notion of an “Islamic threat” inadvertently perpetuate the simplistic “good (or secular, moderate, pro-Western) Muslim” / “bad (or militant) Muslim” dichotomy. Instead of taking seriously the criticisms of Western attitudes toward the Middle East written by Arab and Muslim scholars, many Western writers have preferred to isolate threads of hatred, irrationality and fear articulated through religious discourse, reinforcing notions of otherness, inferiority, and the need for aggressive control. Even the governments of many Muslim countries play into this dichotomy, particularly when soliciting economic or military support from the United States.

The Muslim world is reduced to a form, an image, and an image that appears to be in its essence antithetical to the West. The West thus recoils from ‘all things Islamic’, and projects an image of invulnerability and superiority, conflates its material strength with moral authority. Dialogue becomes a means by which to mollify an aggravated ‘other’, to manage conflict rather than resolve it, and to convince the ‘other’ of the rightness of their existing positions. These, however, are subversive contests to delegitimize others, not dialogues aimed at mutual understanding and respect.

Instead, a framework for a dynamic and mutually rewarding dialogue is one where we bring to the table the best that our civilizations have to offer the world and how these contributions can help one another to achieve a greater flourishing of our respective communities, who look upon one another as moral equals and partners in creating a global community. It is then that we may compete with one another in good works, and in our service to humanity. It is here that we show our truth, our essence, our beauty and our greatness, and it is in so doing that we find our place in God’s greater plan for humanity.

The West is Not the Enemy of Islam

Nor is the West the enemy of Islam. While the West may suffer from a sense of cultural triumphalism at home and abroad, it is a civilization whose hard-won achievements are not only compatible with Muslim values but which can broadly support and strengthen the Islamic community. The Western regard for individualism and political freedom, and its commitment to political accountability and democratic pluralism characterize some of the best of what the West offers the world. Muslims must not be so insecure as to believe that they can only reflect or reject the West, or that the accomplishments of one civilization serve only to underscore the failures of others. Genuine curiosity about the Western experience and serious reflection on the sources of Western strength may be necessary to move the Islamic community from its painful introspection and isolation into a new period of confident and inclusive building of a just and peaceful social order.

The experiences of religious wars and colonialism have engendered a profound distrust of Western motives and goals, while the images Muslims receive of the West, through television and movies, as well as from images depicting the deep suffering of Arabs and Muslims at the hands of non-Muslims, have generated a complex reaction of defensiveness and moral outrage. The inability to successfully challenge unjust policies and the fear that foreign values will induce Muslims to deviate from their faith have effectively closed off the ability to hear what the West may also be communicating.

What can we get from dialogue?

Instead, each has much to gain from moving away from images, symbols and postures. Attachment and commitment to these forms undermine the purpose of dialogue, keeping us estranged and unknown to one another.

Developing a process of communication is key to transcending this deep subjectivity, one that involves active listening and a commitment to sustained dialogue, not rushing to achieve immediate rewards, transformation or understanding, but rather learning to understand how each communicates their shared concerns. In this way we can discover, as well as create, shared meanings and find our common ground, while better understanding our values and ideals as we are challenged to share them in a new way.

Particularly where different faith traditions are concerned, there is a strong tendency to compare the ideals of one religion with the realities of the other. And yet this can be an important point of illumination, clarification and new meaning. While Christianity believes quite strongly in the virtues and importance of peace, for example, Islam has conceptualized peace in a different manner: in Islam, we define peace as 'presence of' – presence of justice, well-being, and social integration and harmony, while the West has come to understand peace as 'absence of': the absence of gross violations of human rights, violence, or militancy. In understanding the meanings we attach to our values we can then broaden them to encompass our own wisdom in ways that add and develop the other in positive directions. We can then begin to understand together that peace cannot be separated from justice and a vibrant, healthy

society. Through sensitivity and trust in the intentions and moral equality of the other, dialogue we can transform our relationships and perception of one another, in a gradual and respectful manner, and in the process reestablish the linkage between our most cherished ideals. Defensiveness which insists that one is wrong and the other is right only entrenches our distance and difference. Rather we can soon begin to see that our values and ideals complement and enrich one another, and can move each of us forward. This is why we have difference: so that we may know one another, and better ourselves in the process.

Dialogue thus involves shifting our assumptions that allows us to recognize that the achievements of one civilization does not imply or reflect that another is inferior, but rather that we are challenged to adapt these lessons to our own circumstances. In particular, the West offers much to the Islamic world in terms of institutionalizing democracy, education and development. Islam can offer in exchange with the West its own considerable achievements and insights into community, spirituality, and diversity.

Democracy

The West emerged after years of deep introspection, existential anxiety and conflict over its faith system with hard-won lessons and achievements in the realm of political coexistence. In closing our ears to this achievement we are losing an opportunity to meet one of modernity's greatest challenges on our own terms. Muslims are not required to reach the same conclusions that Christians adopted with regard to their faith, and do not need to in order to develop an authentically Islamic response to political empowerment. There is a great need in the Muslim and Arab world to deliberately integrate the person, the citizen and the Muslim. This involves a search for truth within Islamic traditions and contexts that begins at the level of the individual. Christianity has emerged with a close linking of personal behavior with citizenship and social values, while Muslims today are on the threshold of discovering the obligations and meaning of Muslim citizenship.

Islam and democracy are not incompatible. Islamic social institutions are more dynamic and variegated than is widely recognized, and provide the basis for genuine participation at the social and political level. It is the Muslim community itself that must discover how this integration can apply to modern living, and in the process discover original ways of implementing Islamic precepts in changing social conditions. Muslims have the right to participate in the unfolding and direction of their community, while creating their own values and terms within the enduring context of Islam. Democracy is not built upon a particular variety of electoral institutions, but upon genuine participation. In this regard there are democratic precepts in Islam, as there are in other religions, to include both the preservation and development of the community, and social justice and consultative mechanisms. Democracy is not a Western product, it is rather a universal process of organizing political needs on an equal basis, and is at the same time an indigenous and delicate flower that only flourishes when deeply rooted in the dreams and hopes of the great majority of a nation.

For example, Muslims need to ask, what kind of citizens can Islam create, animated by Islamic values and contexts? What kind of solutions can Islam bring to affect participatory decision-making in the absence of authoritative guidance in social matters? What Islamic values and social mechanisms can be brought to bear for ameliorating the conditions of modern, urban living? The flowering of the individual as citizen within Islamic community can inspire new avenues of meaning and institutions that testify to - and fortify - what is enduring in Islam.

A dialogue can move us away from rigid adherence to form, to defensive posturing, and toward promoting an exchange of ideas on how to incorporate the lessons learned from one civilization appropriately to another. In so doing, improvements can be made where creativity is allowed to flourish in dynamic interaction. The West, meanwhile, has developed a greater thirst for spirituality and ultimate meaning and has turned to such Muslim and Arab humanists as Muhayaddin Ibn Arabi, Jalal al-din Rumi and Kahlil Gibran, who have become some of America's best-selling figures. As Americans in particular wrestle with cultural diversity, there are opportunities to learn from the life-affirming side of Islamic precepts and considerable experience with cultural coexistence. There is room to rediscover the extensive Islamic contributions to Western philosophy and science and the spiritual content and interconnectedness that has been consistently devalued in their quest for material progress.

There is here a real opportunity for leadership to emerge from dialogue. Today's challenge for the West is to live up to its liberal tradition, which requires continual openness to new revelations of truth. Today's challenge for Muslims lies in the expansion of the original ideas of Islam, and a willingness to demonstrate curiosity about historical experiences and achievements of the West. Where are the Muslim 'Lawrence of Arabias' who seek to discover and know the Western Christian worldview? Why has there been so little research among Muslim scholars on the Christian perspective of the Western experience, or the encyclicals of the Catholic Church, or the Christian struggle to find religious meaning in politics? Much may be gained in insight from the historical political trials of Christianity for Muslims at this time, as it emerged at a time of profound oppression, injustice and during occupation. How did this path cope with such circumstances, organize their community and move beyond them?

Education

"Education" is increasingly coming to be understood as a communitarian and dialogical exercise in 'praxiology' – the art (science) of living in the tension between reflection and practice. In such an exercise, everyone's experience and reflection is tested, through dialogue, and everyone is considered a learner and a person who is still 'developing'. Such a concept of education removes the false authority from the 'teacher', but restores his or her humanity.

The kind of education that the contemporary world needs is one that is constantly inventing and creating new solutions to the world's increasingly and massive problems. This can only be done by expanding the educational process, which must become more dialogical and open-ended, and less paternalistic and past-oriented. The caste system of education must be overcome if there is to be

any real dialogue' if a dialectic based on equal dignity of all people is to be achieved. Humility must not be allowed to perish with years and accumulated experience. As in the Sufi tradition, it is necessary to remind ourselves, and each other, constantly, that life is a path of learning, that we are constantly called upon to awaken ourselves and each other for the search for freedom, for truth, for beauty, for creativity.

Development

Like the meaning of the word 'education', the meaning of 'development' has evolved in response to the rising consciousness of the Global South, but has not yet kept pace with the yearnings and consciousness of the majority of humanity. Also as with 'education', the word 'development' still is constantly appropriated by the establishment (in this sense, the managers of the Western system) in an attempt to "make the revolution before the people do," in the famous phrase of a Brazilian politician of the last generation.

Development has increasingly expanded its definition to include more than just economic growth. Indeed, it is now generally recognized that instead of a neutral, invisible process, development is understood as the result of conscious choices in favor of humanization. From a narrow focus on economic growth, 'development' has come to include political, cultural, and social components, which have more recently been incorporated into an interrelated series of basic human rights, such as those defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The United Nations has recently begun to talk about the "Right to Development," which includes political, social, and cultural rights.

Conclusion

Most important for both communities at this time is the need for active engagement. As cultural symbols assume greater significance within the Western-Islamic relationship, active engagement with one another, through sustained dialogue, permits each to understand the deeper meanings, associations, and implications of this emerging 'clash of symbols'. This is essential if these symbols are not to be used dehumanize one another.

Historically, both the West and Islam have relied overmuch on the self-evident testimonies of their beliefs and accomplishments over genuine interpersonal or inter-civilizational dialogue and bridge-building. A new and mutually rewarding relationship has the potential to emerge between Islam and the West, where accumulated wisdom and insights for necessary progress provide the basis of a valued coexistence. Such a relationship would be premised not on ideas of cultural superiority, but on mutual respect and openness to cultural eclecticism. Muslims and Westerners can learn from each other and cooperate in the pursuit of humane values. Ultimately, in getting back in touch with our highest values and expanding our understanding of truth, we transform what has been a long-standing and violently competitive relationship to a new form of competition: we can compete with one another in good works, serving humanity, and demonstrating to the world the soundness of our values and our contribution to civilization.

This future depends on a meeting of the best of East and West, North and South, and the emergence of a new transnational conscience. This transnational conscience is not molded by the media, nor is it the creation of the elites and intellectuals: it is the cry for human dignity. It is an innate human expression. The West and Islam are not destined to meet as rivals; in knowing each other through sustained dialogue, the West can give Islam the best that it has in exchange for the best of Islam. The events of September 11 remind us conclusively that the whole world needs the whole world.