

## **The Dialogue of Civilizations and the Future of World Order\***

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**M**ore than thirty years ago, in March 1974, I delivered a lecture on “Cultural-Philosophical Aspects of International Co-operation” at the Royal Scientific Society in Amman, Jordan, where I first developed my concept of peaceful co-existence through cultural dialogue.<sup>1</sup> On July 29 of the same year, the International Progress Organization’s conference on “The Cultural Self-comprehension of Nations” adopted a resolution calling for global diplomatic efforts at laying the foundations for a better mutual understanding among civilizations; the conference considered such a dialogue as basis for peaceful co-existence among nations.<sup>2</sup> Through this meeting in Innsbruck, Tyrol, which was held under the joint auspices of the heads of state of Austria and Senegal, we launched a worldwide program for the promotion of civilizational dialogue, with special focus on the relations between the Muslim world and the West.

Again, in November 1981, at the conclusion of our symposium on “The Concept of Monotheism in Islam and Christianity” in Rome, we called for intensified dialogue between Islam and Christianity so as to contribute to the solution of problems “which threaten peace and harmony between peoples.”<sup>3</sup>

It is within this context that I would like to take a fresh look at the impact of civilizational, in particular inter-religious, relations on the global order of today. I am particularly pleased to expound on this *leitmotiv* of my philosophical endeavours at my new *Alma Mater*, here in the Islamic City of Marawi, in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, where civilizational dialogue is not only a theme of abstract

philosophical reflection, but has been of immediate relevance to peace-building on the domestic, regional and international levels. The developments on Mindanao, as regards Muslim-Christian relations, are not only of importance for the situation in the Republic of the Philippines, but for peace and stability in the entire region of South-East Asia. Furthermore, the outcome of peace efforts on Mindanao has special bearing on the global relations between Islam and the West and, in this respect, on world peace in general.

With our emphasis on cultural relations and with the propagation of a better understanding of other cultures as precondition for a just and stable international order, we may have been ahead of the times in so far as, in the period of the East-West conflict, *ideological*, not civilizational, issues were considered of paramount importance for world peace. However, with the sudden collapse of the bipolar power balance of the Cold War, civilizational relations have become an urgent topic of international affairs. We in Europe have painfully come to realize this fact ourselves in the course of the collapse of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, particularly as regards the conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo (with all their ramifications in terms of inter-civilizational relations in Europe and beyond).

With the events of 1989, analysts of the international system diagnosed a shift from ideological to civilizational bipolarity. All of a sudden, as it seemed, the “clash of civilizations” was the paradigm by which international relations were put into a systematic context. Samuel Huntington’s *tópos* has shaped the global discourse on matters of war and peace ever since.<sup>4</sup> In a strange juxtaposition, the apparent civilizational *multi-polarity* contrasted with the global *unipolarity* in terms of political and military relations that resulted from the sudden collapse of the Soviet bloc.

Now, more than a decade after this new concept of civilizational conflict has emerged, we have to ask ourselves whether Huntington’s paradigm has not been allowed to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, serving the hegemonial interests of the only remaining superpower and its allies. It is against this background that we have to undertake a critical evaluation of the meaning and importance of civilizational

dialogue for the future of world order.

In fact, since the end of the East-West conflict, several new *tópoi* have been launched by those who dominate the global discourse in the aftermath of the ideological and power struggles of the Cold War. Immediately after the collapse of the Socialist bloc, Francis Fukuyama, a strategist of the U.S. State Department, declared the “end of history as such.”<sup>5</sup> At the beginning of the 1991 Gulf War, a so-called “New World Order” was proclaimed by then U.S. President George Bush, senior.<sup>6</sup>

The “clash of civilizations” is just one of the latest products of the Western world’s legitimization discourse in the post-Cold War era. The term was originally coined by Bernard Lewis<sup>7</sup> and later adopted by Samuel Huntington in whose approach the advocacy of the global rule of the United States, as the leader of the Western world, cannot be overlooked.<sup>8</sup> Since September 11, 2001, Huntington’s thesis has been even more forcefully propagated on a worldwide level.

The paradigm of civilizational conflict, perceived as determining factor of the global dynamics of power in a post-ideological world, has been eagerly picked up by former “cold warriors,” themselves used to thinking in *polemical* terms. The slogans and the media campaign propagating it have antagonized the peoples of the so-called “Third World,” particularly the Islamic countries, and have further alienated them from the West.

It is a frequently expressed view that the “West,” led by the United States, is trying to create a new enemy stereotype after the demise of communism as the main rival of capitalism. The ethnic and cultural—or civilizational—other is supposedly replacing the ideological “other.” In the set-up of this “new world order,” the “enemy” is not primarily perceived as one representing a rival political ideology, but as belonging to another category of culture, or civilization, thereby articulating a fundamentally different value system. In this obvious process of revival of Eurocentric stereotypes (whereby Euro-centrism, nowadays, relates to the “West” in general, comprising Europe and the United States), religion seems to be of paramount importance.

The “liberal democracy” of the West (a civilizational community which, in fact, is Christian only in a superficial sense) seems to be elevated to a quasi-religious level. As a surrogate of religious dogma, liberal democracy is perceived to be representative of the Western cultural heritage as such, eventually replacing the Christian worldview in the claim for universal validity.

Beneath the surface of the new global discourse on “cultural clashes” being the determining factor of international relations at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we discover the old hegemonic scheme of European power politics from the era of imperialism and colonialism. In its self-righteousness and ideological zeal, the “neo-imperialistic notion of a clash of civilizations” – as it is described in a critique of Huntington’s thesis<sup>9</sup> – resembles the spirit of the medieval European crusades against those perceived as usurpers of European rule in the Holy Land and in southern and eastern Europe.<sup>10</sup> The modern version of the confrontationist doctrine of old Christian Europe seems to be a kind of “civilizational crusade” being declared by the self-appointed guardians of Western interests against supposed threats to the West’s cherished “liberal” lifestyle, even to its very existence as an independent grouping of political entities sharing the same fundamental values. Huntington, for instance, has identified these threats as coming from Eastern civilizations such as Islam and Confucianism. Some even go as far as to construe a “Confucian-Islamic military connection” which they characterize as “a renegades’ mutual support pact” that is supposedly going to “challenge Western interests, values and power.”<sup>11</sup> Since September 11, 2001, the propagation of this doctrine – particularly as concerns Islam – appears to have become an integral part of an undeclared strategy of *re-colonization*.<sup>12</sup> Connected with the thesis of a universal threat to Western identity, indeed to the very existence of the West as a civilizational system, is a new version of *missionary ideology* which preaches the basic principles of human rights, democracy and free-market economy, but defines them as the “West” deems appropriate.

The events since the year 2001 have brought the islamic civilization even more to the focus of the Western world’s attention – in a way that fits only too well into the kind of enemy stereotype

evoked by Samuel Huntington's essay. The recent developments have been exploited for the sake of a "cultural crusade" against Islam and for the propagation of a new geo-strategic design according to which the West and its dominating power, the United States, has the right, even the duty, to "pacify" the Muslim world according to Western standards of humanity and secularism. Thus, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the world has entered into a new phase of the struggle for global hegemony, one that is centered – similar to the period of the Holy Alliance of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – on issues of religion and civilization. Because of the events of September 11, 2001, and their attribution to a particular religious community or civilization, the ongoing global debate on inter-civilizational relations and between Islam and the West in particular, has become extremely emotional, even irrational.<sup>13</sup>

The U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 has further intensified that conflict, opening new confrontation lines with no end in sight. The protracted battle between U.S. forces and Muslim fighters around the Imam Ali shrine in the Holy City of Najaf in August 2004 has been further proof of the explosive nature of this "civilizational conflict." The aggression against Iraq in 2003 and the ongoing occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq have documented that prejudices against Islam, particularly in matters related to international terrorism, serve as pretext for the realization of the national interests of the dominant global power, falsely claiming to speak on behalf of the "international community."

In this emotionally charged atmosphere, it is the special task of philosophy to try to identify the underlying causes of civilizational conflict *sine ira et studio*, applying an attitude that takes into account the actual escalation of inter-civilizational tensions, but at the same time is detached from the level of mere agitation – something which, frankly speaking, is almost a mission impossible under the prevailing international conditions.

What is needed under these circumstances is a *paradigm shift* in the theory of international relations in general – leading us away from a hegemonial discourse that basically serves the interests of

the self-appointed defenders of humanity, those who have diagnosed the threat of a clash of civilizations. The driving force behind this discourse lies in the predominant power's "vital interests" (which specifically include control over the oil resources in the Middle East and defense of the interests of that country's closest allies); in its basic rationale, this discourse is not much different from the colonial doctrine of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's concert of European powers with their claim of supremacy over other nations and civilizations.

Bearing in mind the dynamics of power politics, we should try to develop a kind of "cultural hermeneutics" that will help us to overcome the traditional static dialectic of the "us versus the others" from the times of imperialism and Euro-centrism.<sup>14</sup> As I have first stated in my lecture before the Royal Scientific Society of Jordan in 1974,<sup>15</sup> this dominationist relationship will have to be replaced by a "dialectic of cultural self-comprehension" where the "other" constitutes the *conditio sine qua non* for the shaping of my own civilizational identity.

This *dynamic* dialectic could serve as the basic element of a theory of inter-civilizational relations after the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century colonialism and the more recent disappearance of the ideological rivalry between the West and the communist world. Regrettably, the doctrine that characterizes civilizational conflict as the basic cause of global instability in the post-Cold War period has revived the old colonialist claim to supremacy, including cultural superiority, over the rest of the world. In this context, Islam is increasingly being vilified as a civilization challenging the Western lifestyle, even the Western world's right to exist, and thus getting into conflict with humanity as such. The United States, asserting its position as the dominant power, claims that it has to defend itself against supposed threats from potential rivals representing "alien" cultures, life-styles and value systems such as that of Islam.

In the absence of a multipolar order (aspired to by all who believe in genuine equality among peoples), a form of neocolonialist rhetoric is replacing the Eurocentric doctrine of the old colonialist period; the earlier paradigm of imperial rule over "inferior" nations has

thus been replaced by an emphasis on civilizational differences and the threats resulting from them. Nowadays, Eurocentrism is veiled in the robes of the defense not only of national security, but of civilizational identity, vis-à-vis supposed threats from other civilizations. Even a regional defense organization such as NATO is now being mobilized for this confrontationist agenda.<sup>16</sup>

The “civilizational” version of the old colonial enemy stereotype is rapidly gaining ground in the West’s discourse on relations with the Muslim world. Samuel Huntington’s phrase of the “bloody borders” of Islam<sup>17</sup> is no slip of the tongue; it drastically exemplifies the emotions shaping this new self-assertion of “the West vis-à-vis the rest.” What we witness here is the revival of the old European perception of a supposed threat emanating from the Muslim world (whereby the former Ottoman Empire’s confrontations with the Austro-Hungarian Empire, dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, are frequently invoked). This particular phrase has had a great impact on academia and public opinion in the entire Western world. Self-declared “experts” on Islam have only too willingly subscribed to this view according to which the Muslim civilization is blamed for any confrontation it finds itself involved in. Since the events of September 11, 2001, the supposed threat emanating from the Muslim world has further been used to create a climate of fear out of which the U.S., *inter alia*, has proclaimed its new defense doctrine, which includes a right of *pre-emptive self-defense*<sup>18</sup> (which has been used to justify the war against Iraq).<sup>19</sup>

Faced with this new antagonistic discourse on the global level, the philosophical observer should give highest priority to laying the ground for a new form of cultural hermeneutics, i.e. a new *interdisciplinary* approach towards the issues of politics and civilization. A civilization can only fully develop itself if it is able to relate to other civilizations. Self-comprehension on the individual and collective levels is only possible on the basis of a distinction from another self. In this way, the “other” serves as the “corrective” of one’s own understanding of the world and one’s system of values, and not as the adversary against whom to aggressively assert one’s identity and ensure one’s very survival. In the context of this “dialectic

of cultural awareness,” as I have called it in earlier essays, the “other” civilization is the *conditio sine qua non* for the full realization of my own civilization. The fact that I can properly define, and understand, myself only *vis-à-vis* the “other” (as distinct from that which is not the self) does not encourage any aggressive attitude towards that which is “alien”; on the contrary, it requires respect for the distinct perception of reality and value system of other civilizations.

If global peace is to be preserved at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the confrontationist paradigms of the imperial, colonial and Cold War periods will have to be phased out, giving way to the notions of dialogue and co-existence. As alluded to in my introductory remarks, the Philippines may be seen as a kind of “laboratory” in this regard. Muslim-Christian relations in your country are of paramount importance: In the global context of the relations between Islam and the Western world, the Republic of the Philippines is placed in a rather unique situation. Success of peace efforts on Mindanao will have a positive impact not only on the political and social cohesion in the Philippines and the South-East Asian region, but on the global dialogue between the Muslim and Christian (Western) civilizations. International stability in the post-Cold War environment and, in particular, the chance of overcoming new confrontationist paradigms, depend to a considerable extent on how the peace process works out in the south of the Philippines, and whether a lasting settlement can be found.<sup>20</sup>

Those political leaders who are seriously committed to global peace should first and foremost pay attention to inter-civilizational relations on the local and regional levels, putting aside considerations of mere political convenience. As history has amply demonstrated, the instrumentalization of issues of civilizational identity, particularly religion, for political purposes will further magnify conflicts between social groups, rendering them almost intractable. Civilizational legitimization of conflicts of interests within and between states risks bringing in a “metaphysical” dimension the dynamics of which it will be extremely difficult to confine to those conflicts’ original environment. This is the *very real danger* resulting from the propagation of the paradigm of the “clash of civilizations.”

In spite of the existing *multi-polarity* on the civilizational level, the present global system is one of *unipolarity* in terms of power relations. Unlike the order that prevailed during the period of the East-West conflict (the Cold War), today's system lacks a balance of power. Juxtaposed to the unipolar political order is what the advocates of hegemonial rule portray as the supposed -- and inevitable -- "clash of civilizations" (which itself implies a bipolar or multipolar constellation). The unipolar environment in terms of power relations has proven to be a hindrance to preventing, or containing, that clash; political unipolarity *precludes* genuine dialogue at the civilizational level.

Since the escalation of worldwide tensions in the wake of the tragic events of 2001 in the United States and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, we have witnessed the only superpower's intensified efforts at presenting itself as a kind of "civilizational standard-bearer." Particularly in situations of international crisis, the United States has tended to portray its civilization as an exemplary one; at a Town Hall Meeting in 1998, then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright spoke of the U.S. as the "indispensable nation."<sup>21</sup> Because of the lack of a political counterbalance, such ideological pronouncements have had a considerable impact on international politics and have made efforts at genuine dialogue even more difficult.

Indeed, since the crusades of the Middle Ages, the evocation of civilization, accompanied by missionary zeal, has served to justify hegemonial strategies: This kind of rationalization of an often hidden political agenda is at the roots of what I call the *vicious circle of self-affirmation*.

As recent international events have demonstrated, the diagnosis of unspecified threats supposedly emanating from other civilizations (simply because of their being fundamentally different from one's own value system), quickly may lead to arbitrary measures of "self-defense" at all levels, including even preemptive war. Such actions, based on the perception of *fictitious* threats, may very well generate *real* threats, ideological as well as military ones, resulting in conflicts that will be extremely difficult to contain. These tendencies (documented

by the latest developments in the Middle East, in Iraq, in particular) may make the doctrine of the “clash of civilizations” the self-fulfilling prophecy all people of good will have been trying to avert.

The only, though rather weak, *antidote* to the logic of confrontation, which appears to be linked to the unipolar power structure of today, is the consistent and persistent propagation of the *philosophical precepts of dialogue*. This alone enables a given civilization to reach a stage of maturity and, at the same time, lay the ground for peaceful co-existence among nations.

The future of world order will be determined by whether the paradigm of the dialogue among civilizations will finally prevail. Should, however, the confrontationist paradigm take further hold, what is euphemistically called “the international community” may well be headed towards a new “world war”: one that, unlike previous wars, will be a global confrontation along many different front lines with no end in sight.

Notwithstanding the bleak realities that I have described here, we should bear in mind the efforts of so many people in the Muslim and Western world, and particularly here on Mindanao, at promoting genuine understanding. Thus, I would like to conclude on a more positive note, namely with the words of the I.P.O.’s *Baku Declaration on Global Dialogue and Peaceful Co-existence among Nations*:

There is no indispensable nation, but an indispensable need to recognize the inherent right to self-determination of each and every nation and civilization. Whereas the denial of this normative truth may lead to a state of permanent war, its acceptance may open an avenue to the gradual establishment of what Immanuel Kant described as the ideal state of “eternal peace.”<sup>22</sup>

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## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Hans Koechler, "Cultural-Philosophical Aspects of International Cooperation." Lecture given at the Royal Scientific Society, Amman-Jordan [1974]. *Studies in International [Cultural] Relations*, II. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1978.

<sup>ii</sup> "Final Resolution," in: Hans Koechler (ed.), *Cultural Self-Comprehension of Nations*. Tübingen/Basel: Erdmann, 1978, p. 142.

<sup>iii</sup> "Declaration," in: Hans Koechler (ed.), *The Concept of Monotheism in Islam and Christianity*. Vienna: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1982, p. 131.

<sup>iv</sup> Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," in: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993), 22-49.

<sup>v</sup> Francis Fukuyama. "The End of History," in *The National Interest*, Vol. 16 (Summer 1989), 3-18.

<sup>vi</sup> *Address to the Nation, 16 January 1991*. For a more detailed analysis, see Hans Koechler, *Democracy and the New World Order*. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1993.

<sup>vii</sup> "The Roots of Muslim Rage," in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 266 (September 1990), 60.

<sup>viii</sup> Samuel Huntington, op. cit.

<sup>ix</sup> "The Plight of Islam in Europe," in: *Telepolis, heise online* (Verlag Heinz Heise, Hanover, 1998).

<sup>x</sup> For more details see the author's paper "Muslim-Christian Ties in Europe: Past, Present and Future," in: *IKIM Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (January-June 1999), pp. 97-107.

<sup>xi</sup> Samuel Huntington, op. cit., pp. 46f. Huntington refers here to a formulation by Dave McCurdy.

<sup>xii</sup> With regard to the Arab world, see the author's lecture "Die Chancen einer liberal konzipierten Neuordnung der arabischen Welt," quoted in: "Rekolonisierung' der arabischen Welt? [Re-colonization of the Arab World?], in: *Die Presse*, Vienna, 12 April 1991, p. 2.

<sup>xiii</sup> On the ideological and geostrategic background of recent developments see the International Progress Organization's *Baku Declaration on Global Dialogue and Peaceful Co-existence among Nations and Threats Posed by International Terrorism*. Baku (Azerbaijan), 9 November 2001, published in: Hans Koechler, *Global Justice or Global Revenge? International Criminal Justice at the Crossroads*. Vienna/New York: Springer, 2003, pp. 380-386.

<sup>xiv</sup> Cf. the analysis of the author, *Philosophical Foundations of Civilizational Dialogue. The Hermeneutics of Cultural Self-Comprehension versus the Paradigm of Civilizational Conflict*. Third Inter-Civilizational Dialogue: "Civilizational Dialogue: Present Realities, Future Possibilities." University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 15-17 September 1997.

<sup>xv</sup> *Cultural-Philosophical Aspects of International Cooperation*. See footnote 1.

<sup>xvi</sup> On the changing role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, see Hans Koechler, *U.S.-European Relations after the End of the East-West Conflict: Implications for Euro-Mediterranean Co-operation*. Occasional Papers Series, No. 1. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1997.

<sup>xvii</sup> Op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>xviii</sup> Cf. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America. September 2002*. Washington, DC: The White House, 2002.

<sup>xix</sup> On the legal implications of this war see Hans Koechler (ed.), *The Iraq Crisis and the United Nations. Power Politics vs. the International Rule of Law*. *Studies in International Relations*, XXVIII. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2004.

<sup>xx</sup> On the situation in the Philippines, see also the author's paper, "The Peace Process Agenda as a Measure of Good Governance," in: Hans Koechler, *Manila Lectures 2002. Terrorism and the Quest for a Just World Order*. Quezon City: Foundation for Social Justice, 2002, pp. 43-54.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Remarks at Town Hall Meeting, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, February 18, 1998*. (As released by the Office of the Spokesman, February 20, 1998, U.S. Department of State.)

<sup>xxii</sup> Loc. cit., p. 386.