

DIVERSITY AND THE INTERCULTURAL IMPERATIVE

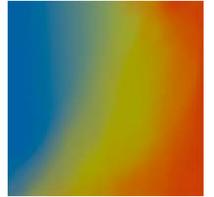
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The aim of this lecture is to get a better sense of solidarity and empathy among cultures by celebrating and respecting the idea of diversity, but also by having a critical intervention against an uneven and unequal global design. What could be learned from this cross-cultural dialogue is that one has to be profoundly responsive to the sense of belonging that human beings experience in different cultures. But who says “response” says also “responsibility”. This is to say, responsibility is not the attribution of guilt to an agent for his/her acts or failure to act. Responsibility moves the individual to respond to the call of the world and to create a future which would otherwise not happen. We can join here the thoughts of two French philosophers, Levinas and Ricoeur, With the Jewish background in his philosophical thinking, Levinas could not accept the primacy of the ontological subject over the other. For him, ontology is the philosophy of injustice because it is an understanding of Being over an understanding of the relationship among persons. For Ricoeur, the ethical response to the other is also a reaction against violence in society. This means that ethics presupposes the freedom of the good, and this good is the source of ethics, not violence. In other words, for the disclosure of the good, violence has to be negated. Therefore, transforming a culture of irresponsibility into a culture of responsibility goes hand in hand with an intercultural dialogue. That is to say, only an open-ended, hospitable and empathetic dialogue which takes otherness (Fremdheit) seriously could be a genuine civilizational encounter. By “civilization” I do not understand progress in science, technology and industry, but a moral enterprise which shows to us the path of being human.

True democracy is not merely the freedom to do what one desires, but also the ability to ensure that what one chooses is the result of a sense of duty and human solidarity. In other words, civilization in order to be an ongoing moral progress has to combine the dynamic and innovative characteristics of the dialogue. This is what will help resolve the dichotomy between the old and the new, tradition and modernity, continuity and change. Therefore, dialogue as a power of communication entailing both ‘speaking’ and ‘listening’ has the capacity of contributing to the survival and growth of civilizations. So, the idea of a “clash of civilizations” is suspicious of man’s capacity to dialogue and a civilization’s possibility to evolve as a living organism. Today in a time when mankind is confronted with a grim scenario involving clashes of national self interest, religious fundamentalisms and ethnic and racial prejudices, dialogue of cultures can be a well trusted means of laying the groundwork of a new intercultural community. I believe sincerely that by promoting a better understanding of the other and by drawing on the best in human cultures, dialogue of cultures could help generate fresh impulses of creativity in human societies. Looking towards to the other is an ongoing process of dialogue and receptive understanding through which we can hope to enunciate a global ethic of behavior for the community of humankind. Thus, the dialogue of cultures must take place in the deconstruction of that which justifies violence. The problem is that the desire of violence

exists in all of us and it is necessary to tame it in order to establish a dialogue of cultures. Tolerance is the basic minimal level required to live together followed by a second level, which is respect for the other, and the discovery of shared horizons of moral action. These objectives cannot be attained by violence and counter-violence. Responding to terrorism with violence is the same as falling into the terrorists' trap. Strengthening the culture of dialogue among cultures proves to be a most important element in combating the calamities of our world in particular terrorism and religious radicalism. For, they both seek to make the diversity between nations the source of conflict, while dialogue among cultures can help make that same diversity the foundation for human solidarity. Since violence and intolerance begin in the minds of human beings, it is in the minds of human beings that the idea of shared values and human solidarity must be constructed. It is not because of our differences that suspicion and mistrust exists between the peoples of the world, but because we are more conscious of our differences, than aware of what makes us part of the human race. This is what happens when difference becomes a license to kill. Cultural differences do exist, they are real, not imagined and they are part of what makes the human race vibrant. During Europe's Dark Ages, that was how Andalusia flourished, through the interaction of Muslim, Christian and Jewish traditions. Later, the Ottoman Empire prospered not because of its armies, but because it was an empire of diversity. Today the cultural globalization has brought unprecedented numbers of people of different creeds or cultures to live together. Yet, our own globalized world is regrettably marked by rising intolerance, extremism and violence. Closer proximity and improved communications have often led not to mutual understanding and friendship but to tension and mutual mistrust. Some have incorrectly declared this most virulent form of mistrust a clash of civilizations. But I think the idea of a common heritage and shared universal values among cultures could not be more timely, for clearly we do not live in different civilizations in the sense that our ancestors did. We live close together, as never before beyond old barriers and faced with new realities. Universality and particularity are not mutually exclusive, but need to be balanced. But the truth is that despite our political and religious differences, we all have a common understanding of what it means to be a human being. In their deepest aspirations all cultures and religions, whatever their differences, point towards the same reality, the reality that according to Gandhi "All humanity is one undivided and indivisible family, and each one of us is responsible for the misdeeds of all the others." Today this is the ethical foundation upon which a viable human civilization could be built. Because no one culture is capable of explaining all of reality, since each culture is only a particular interpretation of reality which is conditioned by the social and historical context. But to understand the unity of mankind we require to think the paradigm of interculturality as the *conditio sine qua non* of the variety and variations of our world. We are faced, therefore, with an absolute need for an intercultural imperative in order to understand the cultural diversity in today's world. The search is for a plural world not in spite of our differences and divergences, but thanks to our differences and divergences. In this respect, we have to consider that our world exists as a result of border crossing and crossbreeding among cultures. There is no such thing as a single homogeneous culture that function as an isolated horizon. In other words, the future of our global civilization on this fragile and vulnerable globe is dependent on our ability to live together- with our diversities- if not in harmony at least with a capacity of dialogue and mutual understanding.

Because globalization is a multifaceted process, the intercultural dialogue has taken a new meaning in the context of current international climate. Thus it is becoming an imperative to think of globalization beyond the free exchange of goods and services and the only movement of people around the world. The reality is that, despite the gap between the winners and the losers in the globalization game which has created a potential for conflict and violence, the intercultural dialogue has become the *raison d'être* of human civilization. Taking into consideration all the above, the tension between universal values and particular identities could be solved on the basis of an intercultural dialogue in which no value system unilaterally lays down the rules and the scopes of the dialogue. Humanity is faced today with the dilemma of either sacrificing cultural diversity on the altar of globalization or using intercultural dialogue to augment the contemporary collective self-understanding in a cross-cultural context and to achieve human solidarity. This is a fundamental step towards correcting various forms of asymmetries and injustices that abound around the world and managing a plural world which is visibly out there, beyond the boundaries of race, religion, gender and nationality. The well-known quote by Einstein that "A person starts to live when he can live outside himself" needs to be matched by raising consciousness that the sense of intercultural dialogue too commences there. As a matter of fact, the ways and means that are employed in order to create barriers of suspicion and discord among human beings, are done by creating a strong tension and a great divide between "us" and "them". However, let it be noted that intercultural dialogue is not about envisioning an idealized image of the world. It is about the relentless effort to make sense of our plural world by removing the causes and conditions that create and perpetuate the polarities of "us" and "them". The ground reality is that the intercultural imperative should help us to overcome both the political homogenization that is resulting from the post- Cold War globalization model and cultural and religious fundamentalisms that are presented as alternatives to this practice of homogeneous globalization. There is a real danger that globalization be nothing more than a process of uniformization of human culture as the only solution in guaranteeing a peaceful life for all societies. The impetus behind this new vision of cultural diversity is the idea of democratization of modernity. In fact, the concept of intercultural imperative, like that of ethical imperative, goes further, in that it envisages not only the multiplicity, but also the responsibility of cultures in a dialogical perspective where each culture develops and evolves through contact with other cultures. As a matter of fact, intercultural dialogue is a democratic process which privileges tolerance, solidarity and a mutual sense of understanding. The intercultural dialogue alone will make us aware of the fact that in the long run cultures are not and have never been monolithic, rigid and static structures. No culture without tolerance towards other cultures can develop. Interestingly, it is worth mentioning that whenever the idea and practice of dialogue is taken seriously by a given culture, it brings with it awareness on a shared exploration towards greater understanding, connection and possibility. Nothing is more important in creating an intercultural dialogue than to prepare a culture of dialogue in each and every society. In order to enter into a meaningful dialogue aimed at better mutual understanding, every individual has to be prepared to exercise tolerance towards other ways of thinking, towards people who base their daily lives on values and experiences other than our own. But tolerance alone is not enough: equally important is the notion of "responsibility" – for other cultures as well for one's own culture. While tolerance



means not to interfere with other's ways of living or thinking, "responsibility" actually suggests responsiveness to the "otherness" of the other. It is care for the world we share with others, which precedes and succeeds our own transient lives. In relation to the economy of rights and duties according to which we are morally accountable, the intercultural responsibility makes a claim on the individual for an on-going responsiveness to our togetherness.