

‘Dialogue of Cultures’: Only a Catchword or a Way toward Understanding and Peace?*

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Since a couple of years ago “dialogue of cultures” has become a common topic in political statements. It is a popular subject of international and inter-religious conference and important topic in scientific publications as well as in the media. But what do all the politicians, journalists, scientists and others think about when they are pleading for a “dialogue of culture?” An analysis of publications and mutual statements quickly shows that there are considerable differences in images, interests and goals.

In the first part of my lecture I want to discuss some of these differences. I will ask for their ideological sources as well as for the interests linked to the different positions. This will need a further distinction: on the one hand we have to look at the main *topics* of such dialogues. On the other hand we have to analyze at the *structures of communication* which are deeply influenced by the political, economical and cultural inequality in international relationships. We further have to analyze the rules of conflict management, of decision making and so on. As a conclusion I want to make some proposals under which circumstances “dialogues of cultures” will be possible. But before coming to the point I have to make some short remarks about “dialogue of cultures” as an instrument of political interest.

“Dialogue of culture” as an instrument of political interests or as a mean to promote understanding and peace

Up to the present, the relations between the Western world and the Muslim world are dominated by strangeness, distrust, and hostility. Such attitudes culminate in popular visions of an approaching ‘clash of

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civilization,' like it was predicted by the American political scientist Samuel Huntington. Yesterday Dr. Muḥammadī and others have talked already about Huntington's ideas of intercultural relationships. They obviously are part of a global power play after the break of the former Soviet Union. Huntington is one of the most important theorists of the US-dominated 'New World Order,' we have also heard about yesterday.

While in the past mighty states like the United States carried through their interests without any inhibition, today the demand for superiority needs a moral legitimization because it gets necessarily into conflict with ideological essentials of the 'free West' like the principles of democracy and the right of all people in the world to follow their own cultural values, including religious belief. To create such a legitimization, Western theorists and politicians distinguish a 'good Islam' from a 'bad Islam' which they call 'fundamentalism.' This construction called 'fundamentalism' is an ambiguous term: Generally it is associated with violence and terrorism, with fanaticism and backwardness. Therefore it is in conformity with the Western ideals of freedom and democracy to fight against 'fundamentalism' and to exclude 'fundamentalism' from the community of 'civilized societies'.

Of course, I do not want to contest the existence of fanaticism, violence and oppression in the name of Islam. But if we carefully analyze scientific explanations, political statements and media reports, we find that the separation-line between 'good Islam' and 'fundamentalism' generally is *not* drawn between a religion which leads human beings to spirituality, peace and justice on the one hand and an ideology of violence, terrorism and oppression of women on the other hand. Instead of that, the separation line is drawn between an idea of 'Islam' reduced to pure spirituality on the one hand and a religion which includes a spiritual as well as a secular dimension on the other hand. It is the secular—'political'—dimension and the refusal of the Western model of human evolution and progress which makes the difference between 'good Islam' and 'fundamentalism'.

This differentiation is the base of Western politics against 'political Islam': The defense of 'fundamentalism' is justified as a necessity to defend freedom, human rights and democracy and to save the Muslims themselves from the authority of a medieval ideology. From such a point of view, 'dialogue of cultures' means an offer to Muslims to overcome their backwardness and oppression and to enter the modern secular world.

What makes such a strategy successful and obviously convincing also in the eyes of Westerners who do not agree with the Western claim for predominance all over the world? Apart from manifest political and

economical interests, this position is based on specific historical experiences and ideological principles which make intellectuals, politicians and ordinary people believe that it is wrong and dangerous to allow a religion—not only Islam, but also Christianity and other religions—to gain influence on the political sphere of a society. Historical experiences and philosophical traditions have led to a widespread conviction that the religious influence on political structures and institutions and on rules and laws causes ignorance, oppression, terrorism and wars. It can be referred back to the European religious wars in the seventeenth century and to philosophers like Rene Descartes who argued that a peaceful society has to be based on rationality, not on religious values. This intention later on was taken up and perfected by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Nearly all debates on human rights refer to his ideas.

Western intellectuals and politicians criticizing 'political Islam' do not mind that Islam is not Christianity and the occidental with the power and influence of the churches, with oppression in the name of religion and religious motivated wars are not the same like Muslims have made with Islam, the Islamic institutions and the Islamic guiding ideas concerning the 'secular sphere'. The Western model of 'secularization', which has led the European and American societies to 'modernity', is the result of a very specific process of historical and ideological development. This is not the place to discuss 'secularization' and 'modernity'. At least it can be said that according to Western criteria Islamic societies are less as well as more 'secularized' than Western societies. As I want to emphasize, this model of development is not suitable to discuss political and social processes in Muslim societies. Moreover, it leads to wrong perceptions of the social reality and to wrong judgments.

On the other hand, Muslims often do not know the historical and ideological background behind the Western aversion against 'political Islam' and do not regard these implications when they participate in intercultural and inter-religious debates. When, for example, the aversion against the 'political Islam' is based on a general aversion against religious influence on the public sphere, it makes no sense to argue against this position with quotations of the Holy Qur'an. Taking such reflections into consideration, we have to ask if a 'dialogue of cultures' between Islam and the West is possible and desirable. I think that barriers and conflicts should be no reason to refuse communication. We have—as Imām Khomeinī always emphasized—to distinguish between groups and individuals who spread disinformation and anti-Islamic ideas in full consciousness and intentionally, and others who

perhaps are misinformed and un-enlightened. Further, individuals and groups who seem to belong to the same ideological faction, often show big differences in their attitude against Islam, for example, Christian organizations, which partly refuse Islam while others offer communication and cooperation. As Muslims we are taught by the Holy Qur'an that the diversity of mankind is not an incident but Allah's will. If He had wanted to create human beings of one religion, one nation, one language, one color He could have done so. But His will was a creation of diversity, and it is the task of human beings to bring this diversity into harmony. Therefore, the dialogue of cultures belongs to the obligations of man.

Indeed, we find people engaged in peace and understanding all over the world. In Germany for example—like in other European countries—there are a lot of meetings, seminars and publications to promote the Christian-Muslim understanding. But efforts do not only depend on good will. There are a lot of obvious and hidden barriers and traps we have to take into consideration if the intention of such 'dialogues' goes further than to offer an occasion to meet each other. Certainly, such meetings sometimes promote peace and understanding, but it also often happens that they result in disappointment and frustration.

Case study: human rights

I want to give some examples for such barriers and traps in common topics of intercultural dialogues. To do so, I have chosen the human rights, because this is one of the most discussed topics in 'intercultural dialogues'. If we compare human rights with the basic values and principles of Islam we find on the one hand a lot of agreements, such a human dignity, the right of an individual to be physically uninjured, freedom of expression and others. On the other hand, human rights are obviously founded in very special European experience and values. This often leads to confusion. Therefore, I suggest differentiating between the sphere of values and norms and the codification of rights.

If we look, how Muslims answer the question if Islam is compatible with human rights, we find at least five different positions:

1. Islam is viewed as a system of total dependency and submission. Therefore it is said to be in fundamental contradiction to human rights. This is an assertion of Western experts as well as of 'modern' Muslim thinkers.

2. Some of them come to the conclusion that Islam—like any other religion—has to be perfectly removed from the political and public sphere.
3. Others demand for reforming Islam. According to them Islam has to enter a process of secularization before becoming a part of the 'modern' and 'civilized world'.
4. Among the Muslims closely related to their religion there is a faction refusing the idea of human rights as just another Western strategy to impose their own interest and values on the Muslim world.
5. Other Muslim thinkers argue that human rights are part of Islam and we can find them already expressed in the Holy Qur'an. Some of them even have used Islamic sources to codify 'Islamic Human Rights'.

The basic question is, if human rights are of universal validity or if they are a production of Western history and occidental spirit. The limited time does not allow me to discuss this question. But at least I want to point out that Muslims who are involved in such debates should carefully study the social and ideological history of human rights. It has to be known that this ideal arose at the end of a long period of wars in the name of different Christian confessions. In this time the Christian churches were very closely related to the feudal rulers. As I have mentioned before, such experiences made Europeans believe that religion is one of the main sources of oppression and violence. The French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650) already demanded for a peaceful society based on rationality instead of a religious moral order.

The ties in Western history and ideology we can demonstrate, for example, in the definition of 'human rights': The Western concept—as well as Islam—knows *individual rights* and *social rights*. But if we analyze the codification of human rights as they are declared to be universal by their Western defenders, the priority is given to the individual rights while social rights are marginalized and suspected to undermine individual freedom. Obviously this understanding of human rights is derived from the ruling ideology of economic liberalism. This is a big difference to the Islamic understanding of human rights which prescribes to bring individual rights and social rights into a harmony. Another example can be found in the *freedom of expression*. Islam is often accused of disregarding this right because in many Muslim countries we find restrictions and censorship. But the critics do not reflect the difference between Islam and the government of a country where all or most of the inhabitants are Muslims. If we analyze

carefully the situation of countries which are accused of disregarding human rights because of Islamic principles we mostly will find feudal rulers, dictators and political institutions, which cannot at all be called 'Islamic', i.e. following Islamic values and principles.

Islam does not prescribe censorship and oppression of critics. Muslims are responsible members of the society. How can they act responsibly without free information and free discussion? But this does not mean that 'freedom of expression' is a charter which allows insulting people, propagating obscenities and determining the basic values of a society. Westerners as well as Muslims prevent attacks against the fundamentals of their system of political and social order. I do not at all plaid for the idea that a given social and political order has to be accepted, even if it is a dictatorship. The only thing I want to explain is firstly, that it is a fake and a trap to discuss 'freedom of expression' like the so-called 'free West' as it does not know any rules and limitation. Secondly, we have to consider that different human rights often are not compatible. 'Freedom of expression', for example, easily gets into conflict with the protection of religious belief. While in the West the priority is set on freedom of expression and freedom of arts, Muslims certainly come to another hierarchy of values.

Instead of constructing a polarized world of freedom, democracy and human rights in the West and an Islamic world of oppression, fanaticism and violence, it should better be analyzed and discussed, *how* (according to which criteria) a society interprets and codifies human rights. It further should be discussed *who* participates in decision making and *who* has the right to control if they are regarded and to sanction offences. If we do so, we will certainly come to better results than in debates only on a very philosophical and abstract level. As a conclusion I want to emphasize that from an Islamic point of view the demand for universal validity of human rights can be agreed with, but as an aim, as a result of dialogues and debates which have still to be carried on. If I had the time, I could give similar examples concerning democracy, secularization, modernity and other topics. But this is impossible.

Structure of intercultural dialogues and the question of how to deal with the given situation

The final aspects I want to speak about are the structures of intercultural dialogues and the question of how to deal with the given situation. Presently most of the meetings, publications and institutions, which intend to promote 'intercultural dialogues', are predominated by the West. This predomination

does not only refer to political and economical power but also to the worldwide predominance of a Western way of life, of Western moral values, of 'progress' and 'development' in a Western definition and many others. It causes different effects which the partners of intercultural dialogues often do not realize in their full importance; for example, the power to push through their own interests and aims by economic sanctions and gratifications, the big influence on international organizations as well as the competence to name the topics and to nominate the participants of intercultural meetings. This explains why in intercultural debates on democracy, freedom and human rights, topics and issues of Islamic origin, for example, the right to be uninjured on grounds of religious beliefs rarely are discussed. This means, that while the concept of dialogue essentially requires equality, the reality of intercultural dialogues strongly depends on a structural inequality. Therefore these communications hardly can be called dialogues in the deeper sense of the term (even if the 'dictators' are not fully aware of their dictatorship).

Now there is the question of how Muslims should deal with this situation. Should Muslims refuse communication until the West has given up this attitude of superiority and predominance of its own accord? This probably will never happen. Moreover, Islam does not allow such a turning away from political reality. So should Muslims preach, insult and threaten the West? Some Muslims stick only on power and violence. With this opinion they confirm the prognosis of an approaching 'clash of civilizations'. Others who do not agree with this attitudes—and I am sure that this is the majority—have to find out new strategies on how to promote worldwide enlightenment and intercultural understanding.

Certainly, the ongoing effects of colonialism and imperialism always have to be made public and should be criticized, as well as the more subtle effects of the Western predominance in the cultural sphere (science, media, lifestyle, moral values, etc.). But this should be done based on scientific analysis and in a language which refers to the Western political and philosophical debates. Within the Western societies there are a lot of groups and individuals that do not agree with the Western politics against Muslim countries, with the ideas of Samuel Huntington and the concept of a 'New World Order'. They are in a minority, of course, and even if they respect Islam, most of them do not want to become Muslims themselves. Nevertheless they are sincerely engaged for a better understanding and for justice. I think that Muslims should seek and promote communication and cooperation wherever it is possible—with benevolent and sincere people all over the world. But they should do it in a state of awareness and wisdom.

Conclusion

As I have mentioned above, promoting a ‘dialogue of cultures’ needs more than good will of the participants. I want to make some suggestions on how Muslims should take action and improve their own position in such dialogues:

1. Muslims should be aware of the international political and cultural background of such dialogues which necessarily imply a predominance of the West and therefore an inequality of communication structures. Muslims have to bring this inequality to the public and to insist on equality as a pre-condition of dialogues in the real sense of the term.

As I have pointed out before, Muslims should not accept the common Western invitations to condemn ‘fundamentalism’ before having explained the term. Muslims mostly do not understand what Europeans and Americans ask them for. They do not understand that they are not only expected to abjure terrorism, violence and fanaticism but also to abjure the whole secular dimension of Islam, especially any influence on the political sphere. From the Western point of view a condemnation of ‘fundamentalism’ has to be followed by a confession to secularism and the superiority of Western culture. If Muslims condemn ‘fundamentalism’ without regarding these Western ideas and expectations, Westerners feel to be deceived and a lot of misunderstandings and frustrations certainly will be the result.

2. ‘Intercultural dialogues’ have to be founded on knowledge about historical developments, about political processes and structures, about different beliefs and values, interests, expectations, and manners. This request is addressed to all participants of such dialogues. It includes awareness of their own values, beliefs, history, etc. as well as information about the values, belief etc. of the other participants.
3. ‘Intercultural dialogues’ should not be limited to ministers, prominent scholars, the ‘*ulamā*’ and leading Christian clergymen. This idea of ‘dialogue’, as it is namely favored by many Muslims, excludes numerous possibilities and necessities of communication apart from the governmental level where every statement is laden up with the experiences and interests of a global power play. Therefore the dialogue of ‘cultures’ should include a great deal of meetings and exchanges.

4. 'Intercultural dialogues' need an atmosphere where the interlocutors acknowledge each other as reasonable, honest individuals. They furthermore need participants who are willing to listen, learn and discuss—even their own errors and mistakes. Presently such dialogues are mostly taken as an occasion to accuse, teach and preach to each other.
5. 'Intercultural dialogues' need cultural translators, i.e. translators not only for the languages but also for a reciprocal knowledge of values, customs, manners, beliefs, etc.

If we study the speeches of Imām Khomeinī, we will find that he always referred to the political and social reality as well as to the intellectual level and the cultural background of the people his speech was addressed to. The success of the Islamic Revolution was not based on reviving traditional values and manners but on analyzing political and social processes and reviving the spirit of Islam. Imām Khomeinī was a great scholar, knowing the Islamic sources and the works of the great scholars of the past. But he was more than a repetitor. He revived Islam as a leading ideology to overcome oppression and injustice in Iran as well as to unite Muslims all over the Muslim world in Islamic liberation movements.

Of course Imām Khomeinī was an outstanding scholar and political leader. To follow him cannot mean to become like him. But it also certainly does not mean to repeat blindly his words without regarding the changing political and social structures and the changing international discourses. The present world is not the world of 1979 or 1989. Imām Khomeinī himself, if still alive, certainly would have spoken and acted according to the present situation. So, even he always has sharply criticized the political, economic and cultural injustice caused by the Western predominance, we have to remember that he did not give up to invite people of good will, even in the United States, to join the worldwide movement for justice and peace. This, I think, should be the guiding line to develop strategies to improve intercultural dialogues. And I am sure that this conference will be valuable contribution to reach this goal.