Unity in Diversity:The Integrative Approach to Intercultural Relations

In the history of institutionalized relations between states, the preservation of peace and stability has always been a predominant concern—an ideal that is also enunciated in the Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations. The gap between the idea of peace and the reality of tension and conflict, however, has proven to be a major challenge to the world organization ever since its foundation after World War II —and that challenge was not only due to conflicting political and economic interests. Situations of conflict often arise in a complex setting of historical, social, cultural and political interaction between communities; accordingly, they must be dealt with in a multifaceted and integrative manner. In order to "practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours", as the peoples of the United Nations proclaim in the Preamble to the Charter, we first have to understand each other, or appreciate each other's way of life and socio-cultural identity. This is only possible if we are knowledgeable about our distinct cultures, traditions and value systems. This truth is also reflected in the Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) according to which "ignorance of each other's ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind", of suspicion and mistrust through which their differences have "all too often broken into war".

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As an important element of a durable order of peace among nations and peoples, cultural relations have rightly become a preoccupation of modern foreign policy. However, under the conditions of today's global village, with the simultaneity and constant interaction among distant and distinct traditions, social identities and value systems, cultural foreign policy in the conventional diplomatic sense is not enough anymore. With the geopolitical changes that unfolded after the end of the Cold War, and in particular since the fateful events at the beginning of the new millennium, the promotion of intercultural understanding has become more than just an ingredient, as important as it may be, of "peaceful coexistence" among nations. After the end of the bipolar world order, which had divided the world along ideological lines, dialogue among cultures and civilizations has indeed become an existential issue for the international community, a goal which the United Nations General Assembly has identified as such in its resolution in 2001 as the "United Nations Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations"—a decision notably adopted before the events of 11 September of that year.

The new orientation suggested here requires a systemic approach that takes into account the interdependence between the realms of culture, politics and the economy, and makes intercultural relations a defining element of foreign policy, something which the International Progress Organization has been advocating since 1974 in its first international conference on "The Cultural Self-comprehension of Nations". Our concerns were echoed, at the time, in the words of UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim, who, in a special message to the conference, emphasized that there is "no future for mankind unless tolerance and understanding between cultures and nations . become the rule rather than the exception".

In our era of global interconnectedness, the assertion of cultural identity can only be envisioned on the basis of mutual respect and the acceptance of diversity. The conventional, often patronizing and propaganda-like approach in the domain of cultural cooperation, a legacy of the colonial era with its unilateral mindset, has essentially failed in the increasingly multi-polar framework of globalization. A culture can only realize itself and reach a state of maturity if it is able to relate to other cultures and life-worlds in a comprehensive and interactive sense, a process one might also characterize by reference to what we have termed the "dialectics of cultural self-comprehension". The strength of a people or nation indeed depends on the ability to interact with other communities in a complex, multidimensional manner, something that also includes the capacity to see oneself through the eyes of the other. Without such interaction, a community will lack the skills it needs to compete and be successful in today's fast-changing global environment. Dealing with differences in a realistic manner -- neither repulsing "the other" nor denying his being different—is in a nation's well understood self-interest. In that regard, political leaders might take advice from Yale Law School Professor Amy Chua's masterful analysis of the history of empires and how their success depended on an inclusive approach and on tolerance for ethnic, cultural and religious differences.

Along those lines, intercultural dialogue must be than a mere corollary of a state's compartmentalized cultural policy. In order to be credible and sustainable, dialogue must be redefined in a comprehensive and integrative sense. It should cover the entire spectrum of the life of a community, and not only aspects of high culture. If dialogue is to be relevant, it cannot be conducted in an abstract manner—in a kind of *l'art pour l'art* attitude that isolates issues of cultural and civilizational identity from the realms of politics and the economy.

There are three fundamental maxims that highlight the integrative approach; the first two are also implicit in the Millennium Declaration which the UN General Assembly adopted on 8 September 2000:

. Dialogue without addressing issues of social justice is artificial and ultimately meaningless.
. Dialogue without a commitment to peace is a contradiction in itself. In particular, civilizations cannot be allied if the exponents of one civilization wage war against exponents of another civilization. Furthermore, in the twenty-first century, there must be no wars with civilizational undertones. Such conflicts poison the intercultural climate not only globally but at the regional and domestic levels as well, thereby eroding the very foundations of multicultural societies and threatening the long-term stability of states.
. One cannot preach cultural dialogue internationally and reject the very notion of multiculturalism domestically. Consistency in the implementation of a policy of dialogue is absolutely essential for the integrative approach.

In view of the experiences in the 10 years since the UN initially highlighted the goal of a dialogue among civilizations, a number of practical measures may be considered in the fields of education, politics, diplomacy, sports and tourism that follow from a comprehensive and integrative approach, and that will be required to make dialogue a meaningful and relevant factor of international relations. We can mention here only a few such measures:

In education: under the auspices of UNESCO, the adaptation of domestic curricula and school textbooks to today's multicultural realities should continue in a coordinated manner, and cultural stereotyping should be completely eliminated from national curricula. Educational systems should, as far as possible, reflect the actual diversity in terms of cultures and religions. Wherever possible, studies abroad should be facilitated and integrated into standard curricula by way of academic exchange programmes.

In the field of sports: the transnational dimension of modern mass spectator sports such as football should be properly reflected and made use of in terms of the potential for overcoming a narrow-minded perception of "the other" as adversary. It is strangely inconsistent and totally unacceptable that, while a national team comprises players of different cultures, ethnicities or races, the national fans of that very team indulge in nationalist enemy stereotypes and differences. One cannot be a cosmopolitan in the worldwide engage in chauvinistic acts.

In international tourism: the potential of today's global travel industry, an essential factor of income for many countries especially in the developing world, should be fully used in terms of the opportunity it provides for intercultural encounters and knowledge. In that regard, the impact of certain practices of mass tourism should be carefully assessed—such as exporting one's local conditions to distant places without due consideration of the compatibility of lifestyles. Tourism should not create animosities and nurture mutual prejudices, but should help to overcome them.

In domestic politics: countries whose leaders have begun to question, or even reject outright, the rationale of multiculturalism may find it useful to study the actual experience with multicultural societies in other parts of the world, especially in post-colonial countries. Traditionally monocultural societies in the industrialized world that have become multicultural due to migration and economic globalization can learn from societies in states that were originally established on a multicultural basis. Such an exchange of intercultural experiences could play a constructive role in today's increasingly interconnected world, especially as regards the reduction of tensions within countries. The phasing out of racial, religious or ethnic profiling by immigration authorities will be another important contribution from the domestic side to an integrative approach to intercultural dialogue.

In the field of international law: the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions should be implemented systematically and in all its aspects. It is to be hoped that those major industrialized states that have not yet acceded to or ratified the convention will do so in the near future. According to the integrative approach which we are advocating here, support for a global dialogue among civilizations cannot be delinked from the commitment to interculturality as defined in Article 4(8) of the Convention—in the sense of "existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect".

In the domain of the internet and new social media: the last decades' rapid development of information technology that has enabled entirely new forms of interactive communication has also transformed, or is about to transform, societies and state systems. One may fairly assume that the interconnectivity and interactivity within today's global information village—not to speak of the wealth of information and educational material that has become available to users almost instantly—will gradually contribute to the normalization of cultural diversity in the eyes of the global public, and foster a more mature and lasting acceptance of differences. One cannot be a cosmopolitan in the worldwide web and a chauvinist at home.

The rationale behind measures to promote intercultural dialogue is that a sustainable order of peace requires a holistic approach that integrates all areas of global interaction, a purpose for which the UN, due to its universal and inclusive character, is ideally suited. In this era of ever increasing interdependence among people, and peoples of distinct cultural and religious identities, dealing with differences has itself become a cultural technique and, more than that, a skill that is indispensable for the prosperity and success of each and every community. The nations that are publicly committed to partnership and dialogue among civilizations must live up to this challenge. They should make clear that no state or people, as influential or powerful as they may be, can use the paradigm of dialogue to justify a strategy or policy of cultural superiority. The threat of culture wars and conflicts due to civilizational exceptionalism must be ended once and for all. The unity of mankind can only be preserved, and peace can only be maintained through the recognition of the diversity of the human race with all that this entails in terms of an integrated policy of economic, social and cultural cooperation.