

# Dialogue between Islam and the West from the Islamic perspective

Aleksandra Dzisiów-Szuszczkiewicz

Warsaw University and National Security Bureau, Warsaw,  
Poland; olasekd@wp.pl

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001 confrontation between Islam and the West was brought to the forefront of international relations. According to Samuel Huntington, author of *Clash of Civilizations*, the roots of the antagonism between those civilizations lie in the significant growth of the Islamic population, belief in uniqueness and superiority of Islam over the Western culture and disapproval caused among Muslims by aspirations of the West to give to their values universal dimension.

This dispute does not necessarily regard territorial problems, but it concentrates on issues such as WMD proliferation, human rights, democracy, supervision over oil and gas fields and terrorism. According to Huntington, Muslims accuse the West of hypocrisy and of using double standards, and consider the Western culture to be materialistic, imperialistic, decadent and corrupt. American leaders presume that Muslims who take part in and are responsible for acts of violence against the West, represent the minority, and the majority of them is opposed and condemn that sham-war. This view seems to hold, but it runs counter to Huntington's idea of a clash of civilizations – according to which one would expect neither protests in Muslim countries nor leaders who strongly condemn anti-western acts of violence.

Actually, one of the first world leaders who publicly condemned the terrorist attacks of the 11th September and offered condolences to the victims' families and to the whole American nation, was the then President of the Islamic Republic of Iran – Sayed Mohammad Khatami. That man also, in 1998 (the first year of his presidency), had presented to the UN General Assembly his idea of Dialogue among Civilizations and had appealed for establishing the year 2001 as the year of that dialogue. A year later, Mr. Khatami held his first state visit to Europe, to Rome, where he met not only with the Italian President and the representatives of the Italian government, but also met with Pope John Paul II in the Vatican, to whom he presented the idea of Dialogue among Civilizations. That meeting, according to observers, in a symbolic way identified Khatami as a leader of the Islamic world, welcomed by the 'head' of the Catholic Church, the biggest Christian community. In the report on the role of the leadership in the Dialogue among Civilizations prepared during the United National University workshops on the topic in 2001, international experts stated that the progressive world of inter-civilizational dialogue will witness many efforts of promoting mutual understanding and

understanding among cultures, for which John Paul II and Mohammad Khatami will be recognised as precursors [1].

According to Mohammad Khatami, the Dialogue among Civilizations would be an accomplishment of the principles of the universal justice and freedom, promotion of the cultural, economic and political understanding and refusal to use force. It would strengthen the foundations of justice, freedom and human rights. Due to Iranian president there are two conceptions of Dialogue among Civilizations.

One of these presumes mutual interaction and leakage of cultures and civilizations, which comes out of the diversity of elements that comprise them. This way of interaction is unintentional, spontaneous and mainly dominated by social events, geographical situations and historical development.

Dialogue among Civilizations may also, according to Khatami, mean serious discourse among representative members such as scholars, artists and intellectuals from different civilizations. In that second meaning, dialogue is an intentional process that aims at mutual agreement and cautious debates. Meta-historical discussion on everlasting human questions like fundamental meaning of life and death or good and evil should be specified and should brighten political and social problems. This discussion cannot disguise authentic, urgent and essential issues, but should be conducive to mutual understanding in fundamental and true issues.

President Khatami in his statements reiterated that as a Muslim he strongly believes that the importance of religion has its roots in the value of justice; it was justice that was the main basis of all divine religions. Khatami argues that dialogue among civilizations is definitely dialogue among believers, thus is a dialogue among religions.

The idea of the former president of the Islamic Republic of Iran can be also found in the Tehran Declaration adopted in 1999 by members of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. According to its signatories the main principles of Dialogue among Civilizations are *inter alia*.

- Respect for the dignity and equality of all human beings without distinctions of any kind and of any nations large and small;
  - Genuine acceptance of cultural diversity as a permanent element of human society and a cherished asset for the advancement and welfare of humanity at large;
  - Mutual respect and tolerance for the views and values of various cultures and civilizations, as well as the right of members of all civilizations to preserve their cultural heritage and values, and rejection of desecration of moral, religious or cultural values, sanctities and sanctuaries;
  - Rejection of attempts for cultural domination and imposition as well as doctrines and practices promoting confrontation and clash between civilizations;
  - Search for common grounds between and within various civilizations in order to face common global challenges;
  - Acceptance of cooperation and search for understanding as the appropriate mechanism for the promotion of common universal values as well as for the suppression of global threats;
  - Compliance with principles of justice, equity, peace and solidarity as well as fundamental principles of international law and the United Nations Charter.
-

•  
Areas of Dialogue among civilizations are:

- Enhancement of mutual understanding and knowledge about various civilizations;
- Cooperation and mutual enrichment in various fields of human endeavour and achievements: scientific, technological, cultural, social, political, economic, security...
- Promotion of the culture of tolerance and respect of diversity;
- Cooperation to arrest threats to global peace, security and well being: environmental degradation, conflicts, arms, drugs, terrorism, et cetera
- Confidence-building at regional and global levels;
- Promotion and protection of human rights and human responsibility, including the rights of minorities and migrants to maintain their cultural identity and observe their values and traditions;
- Promotion and protection of the rights and dignity of women, safeguarding the institution of the family, and protection of the vulnerable segments of the human populations: the children, the youth and the elderly [2].

Participants in dialogue are, among others, representatives of contemporary civilizations, scholars, thinkers, intellectuals, scientists, economists, people of arts and culture, representatives of governments, civil society, international and organizations.

In accordance with the principles presented above, conferences and symposia designed to encourage dialogue and promote mutual understanding and tolerance among contemporary civilizations should be sponsored. Various cultural products, such as books, articles, documentaries and audio-visual products, projecting the true message of Islam and depicting from the numerous historical instances of constructive interaction between Islamic and other civilizations should be produced. Inter-cultural studies and exchanges at institutions of higher learning should be enhanced and historical and cultural tourism should be utilised as an instrument of dialogue and understanding among civilizations.

Not only Islamic organizations like OIC or Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) in their activities have referred to the idea of Dialogue among Civilizations. Through adopting the resolution in 1998 and establishing the year 2001 as a year of Dialogue among Civilizations, the UN General Assembly rejected the idea of a Clash of Civilizations which was based on the thesis that understanding among civilizations is not possible. The UN General Assembly expressed its strong determination to commence such a dialogue to promote the active exchange of ideas, views and aspirations, and to raise understanding and tolerance among people of various cultures.

For the representatives of the UN General Assembly, the idea of Dialogue among Civilizations became a new paradigm in international relations that is based, *inter alia*, on:

- Reciprocal relations based on equality;
  - Dispersion of power
  - Individual responsibility in international relations;
  - Partnership [3].
-

Dialogue seems to be vital for supporting these aspirations. Its condition is the maintenance of diversity, which will preserve the human face of globalisation.

The subject of the Clash of Civilizations, and particularly relations between Islamic world and the West, has also been discussed by AbdolKarim Soroush, a well-known and influential Iranian philosopher. Referring to Huntington's conception, Soroush maintains that there are two kinds of Islam. The first kind, known as the Islam of identity, is a guise for cultural identity and a response to what is defined as a 'crisis of identity'. The second kind, called the Islam of truth, is a repository of truths that direct believers toward the path of worldly and outwardly salvation. Soroush expresses his concern that Muslims in 'their confrontation with the Western civilization wish to turn to Islam understood as an identity'. His concern arises out of the fact that he deems the identity-based Islam as one of the greatest theoretical plagues of the Islamic world. In response to this plague, Soroush proposes that 'Islam of identity should yield to the Islam of truth', because Islam as a truth can co-exist with other truths, while Islam as identity is by its very nature aggressive. Soroush argues that two identities would fight each other, while two truths would cooperate. The problem is that Islam has generated a civilization which has different shades in different parts of the world. So it is very hard to find one effective solution [4].

AbdolKarim Soroush believes that Islam should engage in a constructive cultural exchange with the West instead of adopting Western culture uncritically as a means to development and progress. The Iranian philosopher argues that there is no shame in choosing to maintain or abandon certain elements of one's culture on the basis of investigation or critical inquiry. Blind imitation, in his opinion, should be rejected for the rational search for truth. We can also find in Soroush's texts a call for a dialogue that aims to prevent conflict within the Muslim world. Extremist forces in that world can only be defeated if progressive forces both in the West and in the Islamic world cooperate to tackle the issue through dialogue and constructive engagement.

Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, scholar from the California University in Berkeley, believes that in today's world – wrought with severe challenges for peace and prosperity, wherein the integrationist forces of globalisation coexist with the polarising forces of global poverty, ethnic cleansing and other forms of intolerance – Khatami's idea of Dialogue among Civilizations could be an antidote to the violence of its antinomy – the Clash of Civilizations thesis. In the latter's source, we can find theses about western superiority, domineering, arrogance and cultural hostility. The theory on Clash of Civilizations is a low-level vision cementing the global fragmentations. According to Afrasiabi, Khatami's antithesis represents a high-level vision addressing our global need to rebound intellectually and otherwise. Afrasiabi reckons that the idea of Dialogue among Civilizations invokes the notions of interfaith dialogue and religious hope, thus setting a unique precedent for the re-enchantment of the United Nations, which had previously ejected religion and spirituality outside its policy domains.

The Dialogue among Civilizations has not been suppressed in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. Global and regional undertakings such as Sana'a conference in Yemen in 2004 (resulting in 'The Sana'a Call for Dialogue among Civilizations'), the International Conference on Environment, Peace and Dialogue among Civilizations (Tehran, 2005), the Conference on Fostering Dialogue among Civilizations through Concrete and Sustained Actions (Morocco, 2005) or the 'White book on Dialogue among Civilizations' [5] (which

---

---

consists of almost all official documents, reports from conferences relating to Dialogue among Civilizations) can testify to this.

Two European examples may also illustrate this point. In 2002, Germany presented a project on Dialogue with the Islamic world. Its aim was to undertake the discussion on values, opinions and views, without attempting to avoid controversial issues. One of the priorities of that project was the dialogue at schools and, more broadly in the educational sphere, with youths. That Dialogue had been constructed in a way such that exchange among cultures could be recognised as an opportunity that enriches both sides. Dialogue with the Muslim world ought to be one of the pillars of a long-term strategy for the fight against terrorism and the prevention of crises. And in 2003, within the framework of the Barcelona Process (Euro-Mediterranean Partnership), the Euro Mediterranean Anna Lindh Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures was brought into existence. This Foundation is the first common institution established by all 35 members of the Partnership and aims to bring people from south and east coasts of the Mediterranean Sea closer to each other and to transform the Euro Mediterranean region into a region of peace, stability and prosperity.

Sayed Mohammad Khatami with presenting his idea of Dialogue among Civilizations strove for reinforcing not only his own position, but also the position of Iran in the global arena. He wanted to help his country to come out of the international isolation. Of course almost all of his guidelines remain in the theory. But they do play a role in discussions, considerations and challenges. They are acknowledged and supported by politicians and world leaders. They give aims, to which citizens of all civilizations should aspire, that is, aspire to the dialogue, not to the confrontation.

What seems to be very important is that the idea of Dialogue among Civilizations, opposite to the Clash of Civilizations, was put forward by a Muslim man that represents the civilization which is considered by the West as an aggressive, fundamentalist civilization, not eager for dialogue and compromises. A man from the East, cradle of civilizations, place where prophets of the three monotheistic religions – Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mahomet – were born.

The problem is that there is no will for real understanding of the Islamic world by the West. Proposals for dialogue, mainly from Europe, remain largely in theory. There is a lack of realisation of the aims. Western countries seem to perfectly know all about the other side in the dialogue. So they do not need to listen and be interested in problems of the Muslim world. For establishing true dialogue there is a need for a western charismatic leader, who, like Mohammad Khatami, would make an effort to promote the idea of Dialogue among Civilizations all over the world, to adjust it to the new challenges. However in Europe there is no possibility for a clergyman to become head of a country, which may hinder the possibility of a western alter ego of a man like Khatami to rise to power. Furthermore, when Mohammad Khatami desisted from being the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the cogency of his message became weak. He is invited, like many other former presidents, to universities all over the world, even to the United States, to give lectures on Dialogue among Civilizations, but it does not have the might of interaction.

In the opinion of many observers, scholars and intellectuals, dialogue between Islam and the West, in today's socio-political circumstances, both in the Middle East and in Europe, is impossible. Is the path of a dialogue possible to be continued, to be developed? What should be done to make it possible? Is it possible to create a platform of cooperation between

---

nongovernmental organisations from both sides? What should be done for putting the assumptions of the initiatives by Khatami, the OIC, and ISESCO into practice? Should we talk only to moderate Islamists, who are usually in opposition to rulers in some Muslim countries? Or should we talk to representatives of all Islamic fractions? Is practical implementation of the assumptions behind the dialogue possible? These questions need urgent answers.

#### **Notes**

1. UNU Workshop on The Role of Leadership in Dialogue Among Civilisations, 17-18 June 2001. (<http://www.unu.edu/dialogue/workshops/leadership.doc>).
  2. For more see <http://www.isesco.org.ma/publ>.
  3. See <http://www.un.org/documents/dialogue.htm>.
  4. Hassan Abbas, Islam versus the West and the Political Thought of AbdolKarim Soroush. (<http://www.drSORoush.com>).
  5. Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), White book on Dialogue among Civilizations. (<http://www.isesco.org.ma/pub/Eng/dlg/Menu.htm>).
-