Dialogue against a Unipolar World

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Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and people of other faiths and world-views gathered together to talk about themselves and to understand each other better. This was in essence the fourth World Public Forum-Dialogue of Civilizations (WPF) held in the Greek Island of Rhodes from September 27 to October 1, 2006. WPF recognises the discourse on civilizations as a key element for understanding and improving current international affairs, and identifies two ideological foes: the so-called neo-liberal globalization, with its equalising tendency that neglects cultural differences, and the theory of the clash of civilizations.

The specificity of this forum is its unique focus on the cultural and religious aspect of human interaction. While other forums such as the World Economic Forum (held in Davos since 1987) which concentrates on the economic aspects of life, and the World Social Forum (held in Porto Alegre and elsewhere since 2001) on the social ones, the WPF recognises the discourse on civilizations as a key element for understanding and improving current international affairs. Moreover differently from the other fora, central actors here are neither social movements nor economic actors but elites. Scholars, intellectuals, media operators, religious figures are invited as representatives of their cultures and civilizations with the intention of directly and effectively impacting the public debate on globalization. In such a way, the WPF aims to fill a gap in the international public debate on new world orders.

Among the actions pursued by transnational civil society, the function of dialogue across borders is fundamental, as the philosopher Fred Dallmayr (who has participated in several of these meetings) has repeatedly noted. At the international level, the lack of institutional channels through which the voice of the less powerful can be heard makes even more evident the necessity of creating such a dialogue space. The neglect of civilizational aspects of global affairs has led to a situation of increasing tensions in which hate is easily generated by misrepresentation (or simply non comprehension) of other cultures. By acknowledging such continuous risk, the WPF aims to foster a better reciprocal understanding to avoid violence at the international level.

The Forum rejects the homogenising tendency of current global transformations and reaffirms respect for diversity. Two ideological foes are in mind of the Forum’s participants. On the one hand, the so-called neo-liberal globalization, with its equalising tendency that neglects cultural differences. On the other hand, the theory of the clash of civilizations, eminently presented by Samuel P. Huntington, which recognises differences but to such an extreme that they end in tension and aggressive behaviour. Accordingly, against the vision of the “civilization of common human values”, rooted in universalism and individualism, the WPF maintains that full dignity has to be granted to all differing civilizations. By stating this, valorisation of diversity becomes more important than the identification of similarities, since every civilization bears an original, special vision of the world at large.

Politically speaking this means that all aspects of unipolarity at the international level are to be fought and effort put instead into multilateral projects aimed at developing regional co-operation within and among different civilizational areas. Against both the realist attitude of conflict and competition, and the neutralising project of rootless cosmopolitanism, the model of the dialogue of civilization embraces the project of co-existence and cooperation among radically different political entities. Critical issues still remain unsolved. What exactly is a civilization and what are its boundaries? Who is entitled to speak on behalf of different civilizations? What institutional framework is most suitable for allowing political voice to civilizations? How sensitive and respectful is the civilization project toward sub-cultures and minorities? These are all challenging questions that remain open. Hopefully the debate in the WPF and beyond will contribute to tackling them and enrich the public discussion on the future of international affairs.

31 Oct 2006

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