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Aspects of Intercultural Dialogue: Islam and the West
The Perspective of the Western World

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(I) The state of affairs

It is to be noted that the paradigm of the "clash of civilizations" has emanated from the *Western* world – and in a particular historical constellation when, after the disappearance of the ideological adversary, a new enemy stereotype was "needed" to justify the claim to global hegemony in the new unipolar environment. If one is seriously concerned about intercultural dialogue, one has to identify the undeclared agenda behind the launching of this paradigm at the beginning of the 1990s and to analyze the specific geopolitical constellation in which it occurred. Dialogue cannot be conducted in a political vacuum.

Bearing this in mind, we cannot avoid addressing the crucial issues and concrete obstacles to dialogue. Merely paying lip service to lofty ideals and principles of co-operation will lead us nowhere. Denial of reality has never been conducive to building the foundations for "sustainable" dialogue – something which both sides will have to acknowledge.

As far as the Western world is concerned, we have, in a concrete manner, to deal with the recent and drastic increase of negative perceptions of Islam (as a religion as well as a civilization). Disrespectful and contemptuous value statements about Islam, its moral teachings and the related social system, have increasingly become acceptable even for the political mainstream in the West. A case in point is last year's speech of the head of the Roman-Catholic Church in Regensburg. Through his reference to the supposed violence-proneness of Islam, albeit indirectly by quoting from the text of a Byzantine Emperor, Benedict XVI has indeed poured oil into the fire and has triggered, particularly in Europe, a chain reaction of hostile statements of traditionally anti-Islamic politicians, who felt encouraged in their antagonizing approach. The Dutch member of Parliament who calls for a legal ban of the Holy Qur'an, equating it most outrageously to *Mein Kampf,* and one of the US Republican presidential hopefuls who mentioned, though hypothetically, the possibility of a nuclear attack on Mecca and Medina, are the most recent – and drastic – examples of Western politicians articulating this new confrontationist attitude which, so far, has met with no proper reaction from responsible Christians of the mainstream communities. The majority apparently prefers to remain silent and the political élites hesitate in taking a clear stand – in a situation which would require the outlawing of such racist statements that openly advocate a violent approach towards Islam.

In the context of this increasingly more complex controversy, we must not overlook a basic *inconsistency* in the antagonizing of Islam by the Western mainstream that more and more appears to accept anti-Islamic attitudes as "politically correct." On the one hand, (a) the West

insists on the "secularization" of Muslim civilization, referring to its own experience with "Enlightenment" (which, it dogmatically states, has never taken hold among Muslims); on the other, (b) the West insists on the distinctly Christian origin of its civilization and reasserts it as main source of Western identity – a contradiction that has become most obvious in the debate about the Preamble to the European Constitution (which has now been abolished for different reasons).

If we want to build the foundations for *genuine* intercultural dialogue between Islam and the West, we further have to deal with the concrete facts of international politics and in particular the Western, essentially US, project aimed at creating a so-called "New Middle East." We have to lay bare the confrontationist agenda behind a strategy that essentially is aimed at "reeducating" Muslims – or "reinventing" Islam – according to the world perception and value system of the West. This strategy is not only arrogant in view of the type of imperialist-colonialist agenda it tries to advance; it is also shallow and naïve in terms of historical knowledge since it overlooks the undisputed fact that what today exists as "Western civilization" was shaped and influenced, to a considerable extent, by the flourishing Islamic civilization of the Middle Ages – long before the era of European "Enlightenment."

The West will not only have to give up its traditional "policy of double standards" but also its patronizing attitude vis-à-vis Islam and the Muslims – and meet the Islamic civilization on the basis of *equality.* If the present "hegemonial" approach, which has become particularly obvious since the not yet fully explained events of September 11, 2001, is not checked, the world will, unfortunately, witness an era of permanent conflict along civilizational lines.

(II) Elements of a plan of action

If, eventually, the Western world realizes that this confrontationist agenda also threatens its own long-term interest in a stable world order and if it accepts the principle of *mutuality* – which is the only viable basis of partnership between civilizations and cultures –, such a reorientation will open an avenue towards lasting, i.e. sustainable, dialogue on different levels of culture, society, economy and politics. Such a paradigm shift would imply that the West, once and for all, renounces the strategy of forced integration or amalgamation of Islam into a secular (or secularized) "Western culture" that is not even sure about the role of its Christian heritage and in many instances tries to ignore its historical roots (including Islam) in the era before the European

Renaissance. At the same time, the West will have to come to terms with the specific role of religion in the Islamic polity. A reorientation will further require concrete "confidence-building" measures such as that Western countries unambiguously distance themselves from the idea of "propagating" civilization by means of armed force (a strategy which has effectively become the 21st century equivalent of the medieval crusades). Renouncing the "principle of violence" will imply the West's abstaining from armed interference and wars of aggression in the Muslim world (as in the cases of Afghanistan, Iraq, or Somalia) and ending the support to the continued occupation of Palestine and the annexation of Jerusalem (whereby the latter should be an issue of mutual concern of Muslims and Christians alike).

Without pretending to offer an exhaustive list, we may consider here a few concrete possibilities of productive interaction, at different levels, between Islam and the West that could pave the ground for sincere – and lasting – *dialogue*:

– As regards the religious heritage, both sides may enter into a dialogue on the nature of *monotheism* (وحدانية) as common denominator between the world views of Islam and Christianity. (Cf. our earlier symposion in Rome on "The Concept of Monotheism in Islam and Christianity," November 1981.[*])

– At the level of society, both sides could initially agree on a limited set of *meta-values* as smallest common denominator for peaceful co-existence. Among those will definitely be the principle of *mutuality* (implying the mutual acceptance of each other's inalienable right to realize its distinct cultural identity) and, resulting from it, what we call the "principle of civilizational non-interference." Only acceptance of this norm will enable co-operation in good faith, something which is indispensable for a genuine "alliance."

– If those normative conditions are met, the Western and Muslim worlds will be in a position to engage in a dialogue on *common threats* to both civilizations in today's globalized environment. Those may include, *inter alia*, the issue of environmental protection, particularly as regards the negative (and politically destabilizing) effects of global warming; the threats to the long-term stability, even survival, of polities due to the illicit trafficking in and use of narcotic drugs (something which undermines the very fabric of the state); the threat to the survival of mankind as a whole resulting from the *existence* (real, not imagined!) of arms of mass destruction which are overwhelmingly in the possession of Western powers; etc.

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[*] Hans Köchler (ed.), *The Concept of Monotheism in Islam and Christianity*. Vienna: Braumüller, 1982.

These common threats necessitate joint and co-ordinated action – without requiring, *per se*, full agreement on "metaphysical" issues or questions of religious dogma (as long as the principle of mutuality is upheld by both sides). Consequently, "identifying the common enemy" (understood in the sense of the common threats enumerated above) may, albeit indirectly, bring the two civilizations closer together also on other issues (whether those relate to the notion of human dignity, to the understanding of the *bonum commune*, or the definition of public order, to mention only a few areas). Dealing with these issues of mutual concern may eventually make both sides more prepared to *accept* the remaining differences in doctrinal matters. It is thus to be hoped that Islam and the West alike acknowledge the other's "right to be different" on the basis of a common understanding of humanity and the threats faced by it – unless both sides revert from a confrontationist agenda to one of strategic partnership which, if sustained, may gradually evolve towards a genuine "Alliance of Civilizations."

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Hans Köchler's initiatives and writings on civilizational dialogue:

http://hanskoechler.com/dialogue_civilizations.htm