

## **A keynote Address to be Delivered at the Philosophy Day, Tehran**

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Cultural diversity is recognized as an undeniable fact of life throughout the world. It is celebrated as an essential aspect of human flourishing. It is also feared as a threat to global citizenship. Ecological consciousness is a defining characteristic of the human condition. It is an awareness that the viability of the human species is in danger; thus, rich or poor, we are fated to share the same lifeboat. Ecological consciousness also divides the international community in terms of figuring out an equitable way to deal with the danger to the human species. As a result, the developed and developing nations are locked in seemingly endless bargaining for distributive justice to reverse the trend of massive destruction. As scientific evidence increasingly shows that environmental degradation is threatening human survival, one of the most depressing scenarios is that the international political structure has become more ingrained in its inertia, making the handling of the grave situation even more ineffective. Intercultural dialogue is not a solution to the closed particularism or the ecological crisis, but it is a first step toward human survival and flourishing.

Enlightenment mentality, a form of universalism, is the most serious challenge to cultural diversity. It is also the most powerful liberating force in human history.

Enlightenment can be perceived as a cultural movement originated in the West since the 18th century, as an ideal for the human community yet to be fully realized, or as a mentality characteristic of the modern mindset. Both socialism and capitalism grew out of the Enlightenment, so did market economy, democratic polity, and civil society. As the advanced economies move into “knowledge society,” the dominance of science, especially information and communication technologies will be even more pronounced. Max Weber’s prophetic view that modern society will be controlled by experts and managers seems self-evident and the rise of technocracy in the military, governments, multi-national corporations, social institutions, and even non-governmental organizations seems inevitable. Furthermore, the underlying values,

such as liberty, rationality, human rights, due process of law and the dignity, independence, and autonomy of the individual, are widely recognized as essential for human flourishing. The rhetoric of the Enlightenment mentality, suggesting that there is only one option for the future of the human community, is overwhelming. Enlightenment values of the modern West are universal, at least universalizable. Indeed, liberty, rationality, law, rights, and dignity of the individual have become defining characteristic of modern consciousness. It is inconceivable that a persuasive argument can be marshaled to fight against any of these values as inconsequential for meaningful human existence. Even a government chooses to deny its citizens the basic freedoms, uses irrational means to control the masses, refuses to be law-abiding, denies human rights, ignores the privacy of the individual, it must find its justifications, often fallacious ones, to cope up its blatant violence of basic civility in the eyes of the international community.

Nevertheless, the complexity of the global community demands a much broader scope of the essential values for human survival and flourishing. It is misleading to label them as “Asian values,” especially when they are politicized and abused to serve as an anti-West rhetoric. To be fair, all the Enlightenment values mentioned above are in principle and practice ideals and aspirations in North America, Western Europe, or the Nordic countries. Each one of them took years to come to fruition. Democracy is a dynamic process rather than a static structure. It took painful struggles of courageous freedom fighters, such as Martin Luther King, for decades to confront racial discrimination under the shadow of slavery. The right to vote for property-less and women in some of the most advanced industrialized economies became a reality only in the 20th century. Actually the so-called Asian values are also universal, or at least universalizable. They are “local values that are globally significant. They are also Western values, such as justice, sympathy, compassion, civility, and communal solidarity. If we are to address the urgent concerns of the poor, if we want to make globalization work for developing as well as developed countries, if we want to constraint the brute force unleashed by the runaway financial market, we must design

international institutions inspired by a whole range of values, Western and Asian. Without a holistic vision of humanity which can accommodate a plurality of core values, we cannot even begin to think intelligently about our common destiny. Obviously, the Enlightenment values are in themselves not sufficient to guide us to a culture of peace in the 21st century. Rooted in anthropocentrism, dictated by instrumental rationality, and driven by aggressive individualism, it is a form of secularism which suffers from inattention to religion and destructiveness of nature. With a view toward the future, without a fundamental restructuring of its worldview, the Enlightenment can hardly provide guidance for human survival, let alone for human flourishing. A comprehensive reflection on and critique of the Enlightenment, especially the pervasive mentality it has engendered throughout the world, is in order. Building upon the insights already accumulated by the feminists, environmentalists, postmodernists, communitarianists, we should begin the arduous task of inter-civilizational dialogue in order to reduce and minimize strife and confrontation in our tension-ridden global village.

As we reflect upon the past and meditate on the future we would want for our children, the challenging question that looms large in our minds is: how can we embrace diversity by living responsibly—respectful of others traditions and yet faithful to our own—in the emerging global community? We realize that real acceptance of diversity compels us to move beyond genuine tolerance to mutual respect and, eventually, to celebratory affirmation of one another. We believe that the major roots of sickness of stereotyping, prejudice, hatred, and violence in religious, cultural, racial, and ethnic contexts are ignorance and arrogance. While physical security, economic sustenance, and political stability provide the context for social integration, real community life emerges only if all of us are willing to walk across the various divides and act responsibly and respectfully toward one another. Through dialogue, we learn to appreciate others in their full distinctiveness and understand that diversity as a marvelous mixture of peoples and cultures can enrich our self-knowledge. This actually enhances our effort to work toward an authentic community for all.

The dialogue among civilizations presupposes the plurality of human civilizations. It has the twofold character of equality and distinction. Without equality, there would be no common ground for communicating and; without distinction; there would be no need to communicate. While equality establishes the basis for inter-civilizational dialogues, distinction makes such joint ventures desirable, necessary, worthwhile, and meaningful. As bridge-builders committed to dialogue, we recognize that, in our diverse traditions, there are common values that bind us together as women, men and children of the human family. Our collaborative effort to explore the interconnectedness of these values enables us to see diversity empowers the formulation of open and vibrant community. Our own experience in multicultural encounter, our shared resolve to break down divisive boundaries and our commitment to address perennial social concerns have helped us to identify the values that are particularly congenial to the promulgation of responsible community. We have learned from a variety of inter-religious dialogues that tolerating difference is a prerequisite for any meaningful communication. Yet, merely being tolerant is too passive to transcend the narrow vision of the “frog in the well.” We need to be acutely aware of the presence of the other before we can actually begin communicating. Awareness of the presence of the other as a potential conversation partner compels us to accept our co-existence as an undeniable fact. This leads to the recognition that the other’s role (belief, attitude and behavior) is relevant and significant to us. In other words, there is an intersection where the two of us are likely to meet to resolve divisive tension or to explore a joint venture. As the two sides have built enough trust to see each other face-to-face with reciprocal respect, the meeting becomes possible. Only then can a productive dialogue begin. Through dialogue, we can appreciate the value of learning from the other in the spirit of mutual reference. We may even celebrate the difference between us as the reason for expanding both of our horizons. Dialogue, so conceived, is a tactic of neither persuasion nor conversion. It is to develop mutual understanding through sharing values and creating a new meaning of life together. As we approach civilizational dialogues, we need to suspend our desires

to sell our ideas, to persuade others to accept our beliefs, to seek their approval of our opinions, to evaluate our course of action in order to gain agreement on what we cherish as true, and to justify our deeply held convictions. Instead, our purpose is to learn what we do not know, to listen to different voices, to open ourselves up to multiple perspectives, to reflect on our own assumptions, to share insights, to discover areas of tacit agreement, and to explore best practices for human flourishing.

The purpose of dialogue is not conversion. The desire to convert one's dialogical partner to one's own faith is not at all congenial to dialogue. The principle of "doing unto others what you would like others to do unto you" does not work very well in this connection. "Do not do to others what you would not want others to do unto you," is more in tune with a fruitful dialogical encounter. This passive approach, subscribed to by both Confucianism and Judaism, manifests the spirit of reciprocity. Implicit in this formulation is the critical self-awareness that the best for me is not necessarily the best for others. I cannot automatically presume that my dialogical partner will also benefit from it. Both in theory and in practice, this is difficult for those who are enjoined by the obligation to spread the good news. The question remains. Can pluralism coexist with a devotion to a unitary truth? Yet the "Golden Rule" stated in the positive has the advantage of assuming responsibility for the other. It displays a sense of commitment to the well-being of the other. Thus, the spirit of reciprocity will have to be augmented by a principle of humanity: "In order to establish myself, I have to help others establish themselves; in order to enlarge myself, I have to help others enlarge themselves."

Beyond the wish to convert, dialogue is neither an occasion to state one's own position nor an opportunity to clarify possible misunderstandings of one's beliefs. Its primary purpose is to cultivate the art of listening, to extend one's intellectual and spiritual horizons, and to enhance one's self-reflectivity. Listening seems commonsensical, but we often listen without hearing what has been said. In dialogue, listening must be cultivated. "Deep listening" is an act. It requires openness, tranquility of the mind, and concentration. Actually, the temporality of audio

perception, as contrasted with the spatiality of visual perception, is uncertain, unpredictable, and fleeting. It demands a more delicate and subtle appreciation. However, since the dialogical mode is present in all living traditions, with respect to the personal knowledge of those involved in the dialogue, some new insight, great or small, is likely to be gained. A positive consequence is the possibility of open-mindedness. When one is critically aware of one's own limitation and the strength of the other tradition, the celebration of difference becomes a natural outcome.

The dialogical spirit requires the knowledge and wisdom to negotiate between abstract universalism and closed particularism. Sensitivity to pluralism and, in particular, multiculturalism is necessary to help us to think through issues such as the prospect of a globally shared ethics. This may sound contradictory, but it is a paradox that we cannot afford to not overcome. If we are blinded to difference, we can hardly put harmony into practice.

Every living and evolving culture is open and pluralistic. A culture that suffers from isolation, especially when it is self-imposed, will not survive. All cultures undergo creative and destructive transformations caused by both alien and domestic forces. They must continuously adjust to new situations in order to maintain their coherence and vitality. A capacity for adaptation is essential for the growth and development of every culture. Such a learned capacity is the result of encountering other cultures.

Surely there are alien cultures that present serious threats to the existence of one's own culture, but in general cultures are compatible with and complementary to one another. The relationship between two cultures is often dialogical rather than confrontational. At the initial stage, debates and arguments are inevitable. Yet, after the two cultures meet, coexistence, accommodation, and fusion, rather than total rejection or total acceptance, are often the outcomes of their long-term interactions. Confucianism and Buddhism in ancient China and Christianity, Greek philosophy in medieval Europe, and Arabic culture and European Renaissance are outstanding examples.

Dialogue is a defining characteristic of a wholesome culture. Cultures come into being as the result of dialogical processes. The interchange of ideas among people within geographic areas and the exchange of ideas crossing economic, political, and social borders are essential for cultural development. They are often manifestations of dialogues rather than debates, arguments, or quarrels. Dialogical praxis is one of the most enduring virtues in human communication. It is a human quality evolved over millennia.

Cultures are shaped by a variety of intellectual and spiritual interchanges and exchanges. As a result, they assume distinctive forms. They may share some common features, but they are never uniform. Cultural diversity is an outcome of numerous dialogical processes. These processes may take place within a region, a nation, or a local community. They often encounter new challenges by crossing all boundaries. In either case, the dialogical mode provides opportunities for diverse cultures to find their identities in an open and pluralistic spirit.

A living culture must deal with the dual challenges of identity and adaptation. Without identity, it cannot maintain its internal coherence; without adaptation, it cannot adjust to the changing environment. A fruitful interplay between adaptation and identity is necessary and desirable for cultural renewal and regeneration. Only learning cultures are able to maintain a delicate balance between integrity and flexibility. Intercultural dialogue enables a culture to benefit from taking other cultures as references.

Intercultural dialogue addresses perennial human concerns beyond difference, differentiation, and divergence. One of the most urgent concerns of our times is the degradation of the environment. The rise of an ecological consciousness helps all cultures seek common ground and share communal responsibility. Intercultural dialogue informed by this consciousness enhances collaboration among diverse cultures to develop an ecumenical vision about caring for the earth as the proper and only home for humanity. This can lead to a pervasive commitment to sustainable growth.

The global community is complex. Globalization, especially cultural globalization, has made it even more so. The “global village” as an ideal may evoke a strong sense of togetherness among people of the world. However, in reality, the imagined human community is laden with tensions, conflicts, and contradictions. The need for a universal ethics is obvious. Intercultural dialogue can serve as a forum for discussing universal ethics. A basic requirement for taking part in such a forum is a rejection of closed particularism. Cultural diversity is not a justification for cultural isolationism or protectionism. Intercultural dialogue can help prevent diversity from falling into the trap of pernicious relativism.

Intercultural dialogue is the best practice for facilitating discourse on universal ethics. Human rights features prominently in such a discourse. Abstract universalism may provide a strong argument for the global significance of human rights, but a more sophisticated and practical approach is to address human rights in the context of cultural diversity. It is imperative that culture not be invoked to infringe upon the human rights guaranteed by international law. Nor should culture be used as an excuse for limiting the scope of human rights. Nevertheless, intercultural dialogue can play a key role in advancing constructive human rights debates, such as on cultural perspectives on different generations of human rights, the primacy of political or economic rights, the relationship between rights and responsibilities, and the possibility of deriving the rights of the people from the responsibility of the elite. Intercultural dialogue can also facilitate universal discourse without undermining cultural diversity. Given the increasing complexity of human interactions in the 21st century, all religions, indeed all cultures, must learn to cultivate two “languages” simultaneously. One is religiously and culturally specific. The other is global. The relationship between specific religious and cultural identities and universal aspirations for world citizenship is a significant and timely subject for intercultural communication.

From a global perspective, underlying all forms of intercultural dialogue there are “dialogues” that are vitally important for our times. The dialogues between East



and West, between North and South, between science and religion, and between modernity and tradition are prominent examples. A dialogue that is generally assumed but rarely analyzed is the dialogue between major “post-modern” trends of thought as well as all spiritual traditions and the Enlightenment mentality of the modern West. Ecological and feminist movements originating in the European and American intellectual communities have made significant contributions to redefining the human condition in the 21st century. The time is ripe for a sympathetic understanding and critical reflection of the Enlightenment mentality of the modern West from the perspectives of cultural diversity and religious pluralism.

The dialogical mode is commonly accepted throughout the world. The politics of domination has been gradually replaced by the politics of communication, cooperation, and collaboration. At the international, regional, national, and local levels, the rhetoric and practice of dialogue are pervasive. Even though in numerous areas of conflict dialogue is perceived of as ineffectual, impractical, or indeed impossible, promises of the emergence of a dialogical civilization and the rejection of arrogant unilateralism are being realized in international politics.