



STEERING COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE

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INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE AND CONFLICT PREVENTION PROJECT

Expert Colloquy

Dialogue serving intercultural and inter-religious communication

Strasbourg, 7 to 9 October 2002
Council of Europe

Role of Religion in the 21st Century : Prevention of Crisis among Civilizations

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The Expert Colloquy «Dialogue serving intercultural and inter-religious communication» is organised with the support of

Japan Foundation
- Tokyo -

and

European Cultural Foundation
- Amsterdam -

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Power of Civilization

After the end of the Cold War, the world faced lots of terrors, civil wars among ethnic and religious groups, and conflicts among civilizations. They were really incredible tragedies in the sense that clashes often brought crisis of humanities, such as genocide and ethnic cleansing. Many commentaries sought satisfactory causes of the tragedies in cultural identities. Concerning ethnic conflicts, explanations are much more convincing because resentments of minorities are inevitable consequences of nationalism which was created in the West. On the other hand, conflicts related to religious movements are usually described as retrogressive violence which recollected the Dark Ages under obstinate priests and enthusiastic instigators. Even though the people in the fight are belonging to different religious sects with medieval origins, they are not deferential to the doctrines but struggling against exploitation, inequality, and discrimination in front of them today. In the past two decades, we continued discussions to build bridges among civilizations. In particular, dialogue between Islam and the West became one of the major issues. It shows that promotion of dialogue for co-existence is urgently required to prevent the crisis of global securities. More importantly, we never wish to see further tragedies after the scenario of 'clashes of civilizations'.

The objective of this expert colloquy is prevention of cultural conflict. It may be contradictory; culture does not necessarily cause conflicts, for it scarcely implies power to impose changes upon others in individual and social life. Of course, if the national culture is forcibly provided to the ethnic minorities by government, it must be a factor of severe conflicts. On the contrary, civilization has power to change people and societies according to its norms and value systems. Notwithstanding the changes were often occurred on acceptors' own initiative, as we have seen in the most of non-Western societies, they were usually under pressure of another civilization, in particular, of the West. In addition, regarding the Western civilization, its power was predominant in the last two centuries; thereby non-Western societies were often seized with an obsession that westernization was a *sine qua non* for development.

For the dialogues, the West is the major civilization concerned, and Islam is one of the most important partners in the non-West. As the global standards with the Western origin spread over the world, the Western predominance was overwhelmingly reinforced, and in the last decade, America's unilateral policies are regarded as an unchallenged hegemony. Such tendency revealed a desperate development gap, and ostentatiously showed superiority of the West, while the United States had little basis for representation of the West.

Conditionality in the structural adjustment programs was not a single issue for less developed countries, but linked to intrusive reforms by the Western allies. Foreign and domestic policies, social structure, education, and sometimes, even religious life became targets of criticism from the West. The Western attitude to 'civilize' others will be unchangeable, so far as the West will not lose its predominant position in military, political and economic power. "Are you in the civilized world, or are you in the axis of evil?" "Are you real Muslim or traitor to Islam?" After the Sept.11, 2001, such overbearing inquiries were used for identification. In these questions, the power of civilization is obviously observed.

In the early 17th century, the Shogunate government of Japan severely suppressed Christians, and broke off all the relations with the West except trading tie with the Netherlands. For hunting out hidden Christians, the government made a wooden plate named *Fumie* with portraits of Jesus and the Holy Mother. Government officials called out villagers and ordered to trample under foot to identify their religious beliefs. Those who could not trample were killed. More than two and a half centuries, Japan closed the door, and was isolated from the Western civilization. The Shogunate was aware of the Western power which could destroy all the traditional values and systems by means of missionaries and warships. Strong fear of the rulers brought the brutal treatments against Christians who had accepted another civilization. To inquire one's identity with cultural origin remembers me the *Fumie*, which was a symbol of intolerance and isolation.

Such fear conversely create exceed self-confidence, arrogant attitude and discrimination. Unfortunately, Japan was again shackled with the similar fears in the early 20th century and overran neighboring countries and nations. Then, Japan was overridden by the U.S. troops and defeated to the Allied Nations in 1945. In the last century, lots of nation-states were slave to the same fears, and some of them were occupied with totalitarianism. The latest case was found in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, it was not a nation-state, but had a similar feature of intolerant manners and isolationist policies as the other totalitarian regimes.

For development of peaceful relationships among civilizations, first of all, we should avoid to take up an attitude of teaching or enlightening others. This attitude is one of the essentials in progressivism which burgeoned in modernization of the West. People in the non-Western societies were inevitably influenced by the Western civilization, however, they are already bored with this attitude. Furthermore, for the exploited people, it might be a major source of hostility against the West.

Break the Spell of Modernization

According to twenty years of my field research experiences in the Middle East and Europe, I never met a Muslim who hated hi-technology, advanced medical care and social security system with the Western origin. They do not hesitate to accept information technology, in fact, we can watch a famous Imam's *khutba* in live, and we can read all the chapters of the Quran on websites.

On the other hand, the Muslims do not accept some social phenomena such as collapse of family, narcotic and alcoholic problems, prostitution, and homosexuality. It should be noted that their attitude against the West is just selective. They reject inadequate manners and customs according to their beliefs, but accept if they are not forbidden. When they face unfavorable phenomena, they usually keep distance from them, and wish to protect their families from them. "How do you think about homosexuality?" If you ask this question, answer of the Muslim is very clear and simple. "It is *haram* (forbidden) in Islam." Once a Muslim leader living in the Netherlands explained their religious rules, the Dutch media criticized it as a hatred of homosexuals, and concluded that Islam is an intolerant religion. We should pay attention that even 'tolerance' for minority is used to denounce the other minority with different religious background.

Here, we find out the meaning of social transformation as a hindering factor of dialogue among civilization. In general, the Western societies thought that social transformation was paralleled with modernization. Changes in the social norms were considered as rational consequences of their social transformation. Therefore, if their

neighbors with different cultural backgrounds criticized some phenomena, the indigenous Europeans often showed displeasure because the rationality backed with modernization was denied. This unpleasantness causes an urge to civilize others, and brings about small conflicts in daily life, and finally leads to more serious clashes between civilizations.

One of the important roles of religion in the 21st century is, to break the spell of modernization which was chained to secularism and enlightenment. Secularism created an idea of enlightenment, and brought an attitude of enlightening others those who were living in "unchangeable" religious faiths. Are the individual and social norms based upon religious beliefs changeable or unchangeable? It depends upon possibility of separation of religion from the public sphere. Even in the West, it is various to what extent the separation was implemented. In France which enacted *Loi concernant la separation des Eglises et de l'Etat* (the law of Separation between the State and Church) in 1905, secularism was definitely institutionalized. Comparing with the case of France, for example, Germany applied less restrictive manner for visibility of religious culture in the public sphere. Religious education in public school is guaranteed as a constitutional right. In the Netherlands, secularism is no more than an individual matter of principle. Owing to the distinct multicultural policy of cultural pillar system (*verzuiling*), everyone has rights to live comfortably according to their religious faiths or other principles both in public and private lives. Concerning education, the Muslims in the Netherlands have Islamic schools financed by the government.

Because of the strict secularism rule, in France, an attitude of enlightenment is apparently observed. Veiling issues of the Muslim women have been bothering both host and immigrant societies. In 1989, at a public school in Creil, three Muslim girls wearing scarves were not allowed to attend classes without taking off them, because head scarf was thought as a religious symbol of Islam. According to the state principle of secularism, *laïcité*, showing a religious symbol in the public institutions including schools, was violating constitutional provision of the neutrality.

If the case was just argued as a legal issue, it would not be so controversial. Yet, many French intellectuals censured that the head scarf was also a symbol of subordinate situation of the Muslim women to men. They were driven to a sense of duty to enlighten and civilize the Muslim neighbors. Some articles stressed that head scarf was an indication of the Islamic threats which challenge to the universal value such as democracy and human rights. As the controversy spread all over the Republic, the principle of *laïcité*, was assumed to be a task of civilization with universality.

Power of the Western civilization usually discloses itself in this way. We must be careful that such discourses are based upon an assumption of monolithic face of the Muslims. Diversity of religious life in the Muslim societies has been disregarded. "Why are you wearing head scarf?" When you ask this question to Muslim women, you immediately find the diversity. The answers are really various, from obedience to the religious rule to jealousy of husband. And many Muslim ladies will ask you, "Do you believe that women can be emancipated if they expose too much of their body? Is Exposing body not merchandising female sexuality?" These questions show what we can not see on account of the assumption. It is an irony that the Muslims, who are always blamed from the Western feminists, also have critical views on merchandising sexuality. In fact, so many assumptions from imaginative Islam obstructed to make a fair debate between Islam and the West. Before dialogue, it is very necessary to reconsider such assumptions and premises.

Religion and Nation-state

Theological differences are not obstacles to build bridges among civilizations. Although many clashes can be seen as religious conflicts, they are usually fighting each other just under symbolic flags such as star, crescent and cross. The deeper causes of clashes exist in superiority of nation-state which was built upon nationalism. Another important role of religion is to find a solution to ease tension among nation-states, and to reconsider the relationships between religion and state.

As Christendom was divided into the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant, then more fragmented into national level, churches served the states and the nations. During the Hundred Years' War, King Edward III and King Philippe VI prayed for victory to the same God. People in each country believed that God bless their King and his nation, irrespective of victory or defeat. The fragmentation of Christendom confused the true one God, but it was ignored since the Christian kingdoms fought each other. In the naval battle of Lepanto in 1571, Sultan Selim II and King Felipe II also prayed his own victory to the same God. For the Christians, it might be too difficult to understand the Allah is the same God of them.

The major monotheistic religions have certain similarities in individual and social ethics such as fairness, tolerance and mutual assistance than hostility and confrontation. Yet, the oneness of God, the basis of beliefs, has not been shared among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Islam is the only religion which accepted their God is the same of Christians and Jews tracing back to the former prophecies.

What are preventing factors from the mutual understanding among religions? We can find the answers also in the path of modernization in the West. Firstly, due to the fragmentation of religious civilizations, common values among religions had less significance in the framework of nation-state. Secondly, secularism as a principle of nation-state separated people from churches, and convinced them obedience to religious faith was no more than private matter. Thirdly, individualism also widely infiltrated to the people as rationalism took the place of theology. After the Scientific Revolution in the 17th century, the Divine Providence was replaced by natural law. Integrating these ideologies, the West built a lot of nation-states with their own firm principles.

For the people those who had lost God, new normative identities were needed. Since the late 19th century, communism offered certain norms in trans-national scale, however, breakdown of the Soviet Union and its allies showed that ideology could not contribute to emancipate human beings. Superiority of nation-state based upon nationalism thus kept the predominant position of identities over the centuries. In wars, people no longer hesitated to kill enemies because they obtained 'justice' which was not given by God but by state rulers. Although nationalism was often criticized as the causes of wars, they were considerably reinforced even after the end of the Cold War along with globalization.

We already noticed that globalization is a double-edged sword for global security. For instance, trans-national migration is a phenomenon which accelerates to take away state walls, at the same time, it is a major factor of xenophobia. The European Union is promoting further integration, yet is confronting the rise of nationalism due to increasing in immigrants particularly from the Muslim countries. Implementation of 'global standard' is perceived as a phenomenon of the global unification for one side, but for the other side, forcing 'global standard' causes of fear, anger and hostility. 'Clash of civilizations' is not more than a scenario, but if a super power is responsible for the sponsorship, and aggressive soldiers participate as actors, the horrible

spectacle can be realized. The scenario is very much persuasive, not with its reality, but its agitative story which manipulates people in fear and anger.

People in fear wish to escape from it by showing apparent power and by threatening enemies. Such powers are now possessed by terrorists, armed forces of each nation-state, and military allies in the same civilization. Fear itself exists in mind of individuals. One of the omnipresent significations of religion is salvation, in the sense that it reduces all the distress of human beings. Sharing this universal value of religion is much more important than appealing the differences among civilizations. Salvation can not be given by ethnic ties, sovereignty of nation-state, and power of civilization, but can be given by wisdom in religious thoughts.

Religion has a long history of struggle with the secular power of states. As well as in the West, in the Muslim countries, religious movements have been major oppositions against the nation-states. Islamic organizations were divided into official institutions and antigovernment groups, the former were authorized by government to legitimate the regimes, and the latter were banned as illegal or terrorist movements. The Muslims are required to obey their religious law both in personal and social lives, for this reason, it is impossible to divide society into secular (public) sphere and religious (personal) sphere like in France. After the establishment of nation-states, separation of Islamic rules from the state legal system was one of the most serious issues for all the Muslim countries.

Relationships between religion and state should be re-examined. The normative phase is also an essential for every religion which guides believers and their communities for good life. But if it is excessively appealed to the community in the shape of political reforms, religions cause clashes with the regimes. Under the present nation-state system operated by secular systems, religion hardly find a space to use power and authority. But this situation brought about an advantage for religion. Religious leaders comprehended that power struggles tortured their followers. In this regard, they have more capability to save people from distress than state rulers with military power. Today, religion has a key to emancipate the spellbound people those who wish to show their power as well as those who were urged to resistance in despair.

As an Aesop's fable said, the sun let a traveler take off his garments with his warmth, but how the north wind violently blew, he wrapped his cloak around him. Every religion is now required to revitalize its signification to create reassurance in which people can take off armors without forcing. Difference is not a focus of the discussion, because it always implies superiority and inferiority. Mutually tolerant relations can not be obtained by means of identification of each religion. For preventing further tragedies, it is definitely important to share the common objectives of religions which create peace of mind in different beliefs.