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A Dialogue among Civilizations

by Giandomenico Picco

It took me a very short time to understand why the United Nations membership quickly reached a consensus in Fall 1998 when it declared 2001 the UN Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. Doubtless, my understanding had little to do with the politics of the issue or the reasons behind the General Assembly's consensus. Yet, it all seemed crystal clear when the secretary-general asked for my contribution to this concept, to give it a meaning from a UN perspective. I felt that the idea of a dialogue was an instinctive response to a decade that had witnessed so many indignities justified under false pretenses—a decade that virtually began under the fallacy of “the clash of civilizations.” I find it even more appropriate that the call for a dialogue among civilizations should actually stem from the Islamic world—specifically, Iran, a region and civilization that greatly suffered from the fallacy of the clash theory.

It is very difficult to find anyone who would oppose the concept of dialogue. But even more difficult is the act of transforming the instinctively sound cry for a dialogue into a constructive, practical, and focused approach that would benefit the world organization, and with it, its membership. The challenge to me, therefore, was not *why* a dialogue among civilizations, but rather *how* to achieve it.

Being neither an academic nor a scientist, neither a statesman nor a leading global financier, I thought I would search within my own life experience to make some sense of what dialogue could mean to me. As one of the six billion inhabitants of this planet, I can claim at least as much life experience as any. I have been fortunate to enjoy the opportunity to work, live, and interact in various parts of the world at various depths of human exchange, sometimes so deep as to actually tread the border where life and death meet. It seems to me, looking at the beginning of my life, that we have all moved on this earth in different ways and at different levels, but nevertheless we have moved in the same direction: that of becoming more and more interconnected, more and more affected by each other, and, accordingly and simply, closer to each other. No matter what the level of wealth or knowledge we possess, the inhabitants scattered around this globe are more in contact today than we were fifty years ago. Our proximity to one another is destined only to increase, and our ability to affect each other will grow ever greater. Not much else seems necessary to make the call for a dialogue quite compelling.

Almost immediately after uttering the words “dialogue among civilizations,” images came to my mind of a trip I undertook in 1994 as a private citizen across the Balkans

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at war. I had wanted to go there, like many, I presume, in search of an answer that newspaper commentaries and politicians' statements would not provide. The question I had was "Why?" Why would so many seem to need so much "enemy," and why had so many lies been used to justify it? What was ethnic cleansing if not the ignominious manifestation of a mindset that perceives diversity as a threat? But the simplicity of this answer was hidden behind political explanations, historical accountings, institutional analyses, and religious theories. As it turned out, they were all lies, or, to be kinder, cover-ups for the decisions made by the only entity on earth that can employ rational faculties in support of its choices: the human individual. I walked through the battlefields of the Balkans in 1994, as I had walked for different reasons and in different capacities through the streets of Beirut some years earlier, and the valleys of Afghanistan several years before that. In vain I looked for the "killing hand of history," "the raping arm of culture," the "destructive boot of institutions," or the "mutilating fist of religion." They were nowhere to be found. What I did find were the faces and the names of individual killers and individual victims. What I found were the stories of single human beings: their crimes, their failed hopes, and their desperate attempts to justify their guilt under different names, but to no avail. They could not succeed and they will never succeed. The responsibility for what they did was, is, and will remain individual. Had they confessed the truth, they likely would have said that they acted in self-defense. But against what? Against something different, something "other" than themselves. They were unwilling or unable to see that diversity, even if it existed, could carry not enmity but rather the potential for growth and betterment for all. But they could not see, or did not wish to see, because to see the greatness in one's own neighbors perhaps requires one to see the potential greatness inside of oneself. I asked myself if I could ever see the greatness in my neighbor if I were preaching only his evil. If I am so great, what good to me is the evil of my enemy?

Dialogue is an instinctive response to a decade that has witnessed so many indignities justified under false pretenses.

All these images came to me as the dialogue among civilizations was superimposed in my mind, as perhaps the response to the prophecy of an unavoidable clash. It was, of course, fitting as well that those who justified their deeds under the cover of history, religion, and culture would present their actions as unavoidable; after all, if history, culture, and religion were the real culprits, they were surely too powerful to be stopped by individual actors. Therefore, accepting the unavoidability became a necessary component of the blasphemy of ethnic cleansing or any other crime perpetrated in the name of the so-called threat of diversity. If it was unavoidable, then the individual had no responsibility; he then was simply a tool manipulated by the great machinery of history or culture or religion, and many believed it. I have too great a faith in human beings to accept such a lie. If we accept unavoidability, I thought, we might as well never get out of bed in the morning, for we claim no authorship of any part of our life.

Yes, I said to the secretary-general of the UN, I would take on this assignment and try to make it a response to the fallacy of ethnic cleansing, to the lies and the blasphemies committed during the 1990s by individuals who perceived and still perceive diversity and “otherness” as a threat to them. No need, therefore, to be deconstructed by a semantic conversation on what is a civilization and what is not; even less to count how many civilizations there are, have been, and will continue to be. The focus of the dialogue, I thought, had to be quite clear, and yet practical; quite touchable, and yet ethical; quite visible, and yet conceptual. To this day, I do not know if this can be achieved or whether the contribution I will try to make through the opportunity offered to me by the secretary-general will actually reach the destination I would like it to. Nevertheless, I will pursue what I believe is the focus and simple objective: the dialogue may well have to be one simply between those who perceive diversity as a threat and those who perceive diversity as an opportunity for betterment and growth.

Is not the United Nations itself fundamentally based on the appreciation and celebration of diversity, on the acceptance that we are—each of us as an individual and as groups—rich because of our own individual identities, and yet profoundly equal in the humanity that is inherent to us all? What, then, of my contribution? I am unable to conduct a dialogue among religions, for I am not a theologian, and indeed because that dialogue is already under way; ill equipped to conduct a dialogue among traditional civilizations, for I do not even know how many the world will claim to have; and unwilling to interpret my task as favoring exclusively a dialogue between Islam and the West, for this will cut out all of the rest. I will try to make my contribution to a dialogue that touches the nerve of our own mindset, which is the way we look at the “other.” Can the dialogue be the seed not only to unmask the fallacy of the clash but also to provide a new paradigm of international relations?

A NEW PARADIGM OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The Enemy. Millennia of traditions, one could say, have led us to believe that the enemy is an indispensable component of social life. Some may even claim that we never had leaders who could lead without an enemy. Others would argue that it is part of “human nature” to define oneself according to what one is not, and to search out distinctions between others and ourselves. It seems to me that in ruling a society, the enemy is a convenient management tool. But is it necessarily an indispensable tool? Perhaps asking the very question raises a challenge to the existing patterns of relationship at both the human and the institutional level. Various philosophies over the centuries have existed based on different presentations of a dichotomy, which is perhaps the consequence of the two existential features of our being, life and death itself. And yet, if it is indeed necessary or at least extremely convenient for leaders and rulers to make use of the concept of enemy, a few questions could legitimately be asked. Why does one need to define and to aggrandize one’s own nemesis to define oneself? Would it not be better for a ruler to present his own positive and constructive contributions to a vision of society that he wishes to pursue, instead of rushing to

profile the other side, the enemy? If the ideas we wish to pursue, the vision we wish to represent, are really so good, so strong, so compelling and worthwhile, why even waste our time in describing their opposite? Is it not logical to assume that the more a ruler demonizes his enemy, the less positive value he seems to possess of his own? Does it not stand to reason to say that the more one needs an enemy, the less one has to offer? The unbearable presence of the enemy is to me an indication of the yet primitive stage of our human development. Can we reasonably aspire to societies led by leaders without enemies? It may be a very idealistic vision, but it is one I am not prepared to give up, even though I accept that few of us will ever see this dream materialize. That should not dissuade us, however, from finding an intermediate step we can take in the meantime in an attempt to create a society where each of us is valued for the positive contribution he can provide, and not for the size of the enemy he can project.

The unbearable presence of the enemy is an indication of the yet primitive stage of our human development.

If we accept that enemy is indeed a managerial tool for societies, I would humbly propose that an intermediate step could be to look for an enemy that is common to us all in today's world. Then we will not have a proliferation of enemies, but a concentration of focus on an enemy that does not discriminate among us, no matter what our location or station in life. That enemy, I suggest, is intolerance. It is a different way to describe the mindset of those who perceive diversity as a threat, and unfortunately it is very real. It is so real that it cuts across civilizations, divides and cuts across society vertically as well as horizontally. I cannot think of a bigger enemy, or of a greater threat. How to defy intolerance? I suppose it would require much less ignorance than now exists throughout the world, and a much larger capacity to listen to each other than we now seem to possess. I may be wrong, and I stand to be corrected, but I think that real dialogue has much to contribute to the creation and understanding of the real enemy we all face, and perhaps to the "undemonization" of the smaller enemies to which we have become accustomed.

Individual Responsibility and Accountability. The second element of this new paradigm of international relations stems from my great faith in the ability and grandiosity of the human spirit that resides in each individual. It may well be that institutions have helped us to keep at bay the irrationality of the whims of the king, and to safeguard the will of the majority and the rights of the minority. It may well be true that through said institutions, we have given shape to what we now call the collective decision-making process. It seems to me, however, that even if there are times and places where decisions can be called collective, the responsibility is and must remain individual. If I do not have a stake in a collective decision, I will take it lightly. That is, if the outcome of the decision will neither gain nor lose me anything, that outcome will be of no consequence to me, and I will not take the decision seriously. A collective decision seems to be more effective if it is considered to be, at its heart, individual. We

are moving slowly in that direction as an international society, but we are just at the beginning of the journey.

The justifications “I followed orders” or “the decision was taken by the institution” are all too easy. They should not and do not, in my opinion, take away the responsibility from the individual. Hiding one’s own responsibility behind the cover of “collective decisions” is pretty much similar to invoking history or religion as the culprit for action perpetrated by human beings here and now, which in turn sounds very much like the words used by so many as justification in the past: “I was following orders.”

Impartiality was another concept used by many in Europe after World War II that served the purpose of avoiding responsibility and difficult decisions. An entire political culture has developed to glorify the concept. So successful were its proponents that they have convinced many around the world that impartiality is a quality that organizations like the UN should make their own above all. As I became a practitioner of diplomacy in war situations—and, I should add, bargained for my own life or for that of others—I never found that impartiality was an operative concept; rather, it was another cover-up for something else. It is not impartiality that is demanded; it is, rather, credibility. To keep my word no matter what the cost to me is what made the difference.

Credibility is the consequence of one’s own commitment to the declared objective. It appeared to me more and more that impartiality was not only inoperative but furthermore a convenient escape from making decisions and assuming responsibility. Thus, at times, impartiality is even at odds with accountability, the very basis of credibility. When dealing with life and death, credibility mattered; impartiality was not even called into question. When dealing with life and death, there is no room for those who do not have the courage to make decisions. Perhaps in a new paradigm of international relations, we may need more people who have the courage to make choices and assume their responsibilities, and fewer people who stay “impartial” as a means of avoiding the need to make any decision at all.

Real dialogue may well suggest that we revisit the concept of enemy and revalue the contribution and the responsibility of the individual in international affairs.

Should accountability increase at the individual level in international affairs—and, for that matter, in societal affairs—I would submit that it should reduce corruption, abuse of power, and indeed the lightness with which decisions that affect others are made. I am not so sure that even institutional reforms would really mean much unless we introduce a reform in the mindset of individuals. What could be more effective than to adopt individual accountability, even for institutional decisions, even for collective decisions—for all those decisions, in fact, that have a bearing on the life and the well-being of others? It is a debatable issue, I know, as debatable as when UN secretary-general Kofi Annan used the terminology “individual sovereignty” as the

other side of the coin to national sovereignty. But it seems to me that a new paradigm engendered by a real dialogue may well suggest that on one hand, we revisit the concept of enemy, and on the other, we revalue the contribution and the responsibility of the individual in international affairs. If we believe in the greatness of the individual human spirit and the contribution that each of us individually can provide, then we will unleash the greatness that makes that individual accountable for his achievements as well as for his failures.

When everything is said and done, I, on my account, will consider that our efforts to initiate a dialogue among civilizations will have been successful if only one individual more than today will eventually accept that diversity is not a threat but rather the beginning of life itself.