

International Conference on the Dialogue of Civilizations
United Nations University
31 July -3 August 2001

Additional recommendations for a Dialogue between Civilizations

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As a discussant, I would like to make three points: first, on the comparative study of some key notions of ethical thinking; second, on the role of the mediator in dialogue among civilizations; and third, on the ethical feasibility of tolerance.

1 There is no such concept as dialogue among civilizations. Dialogue only exists among peoples from different cultural backgrounds. The goal of a Global Ethos is to search for ways in which common people can negotiate with each other in their daily lives. In this context, we must be very careful about the subtle differences that lie behind similar moral predications, as illustrated by the following example. While the Bible says: “do to your neighbors what you want your neighbors do to you,” the Confucian Analects mention: “do not do to your neighbors what you don't wish your neighbors do to you.” The similarity between these two recommendations has been pointed out since the time of Matteo Ricci but the difference between them remains problematical. While the Bible believes in the goodwill and moral judgment of peoples, and proposes their active involvement, the Confucian Analects suggest a passive approach and do not trust the unconditional application of people's own moral judgment to others. Whereas the Confucian attitude may be criticized as escapist from a Biblical point of view, the biblical encouragement may imply an interventionist attitude from a Confucian perspective. Is it possible to reconcile between these two viewpoints?

According to the Huntingtonian viewpoint, Confucianism and Islam, combined together, constitute a strong opponent to Western Civilization. However, judging from the two moral codes mentioned above, Islam shows far more affinity with the self-righteousness of the Biblical recommendation, which is opposed to the more reserved moral proposed by Confucius. When discussing humanity and human rights, we should take into account the subtle but fundamental difference between Confucian (collective rather than individualistic), Islamic (based on the concept of “God Almighty”) and Western secular views of the notions "humanity" and "human rights." We should also try to search for a commensurability (or a lack of it) and supplementation of these notions among civilizations, as Professor Imamichi has proposed by his exemplary comparison between the Western "subject formation" and the East Asian notion of human duty, as one's own sacrifice to the heaven. Let me add here that in Arabic, the word for "charge" (amāna) derives from the word for "belief" (imān).

2 This bring me to my second point, namely to the role of the mediator. Dialogue quite often exacerbates, rather than eliminates, oppositions between and among groups involved in it. The axes tend to become fortified by accentuating differences, which separate the West from the East and the North from the South. Instead of such a binary opposition, I propose a triangular matrix. As Rhoda Kadalie brought us to South Africa, let me evoke a writer from this country.

Laurens van der Post was a prisoner of war in a Japanese P.O.W. camp in Java during the Second World War. He experienced frontal collisions between Eastern and Western value systems in the struggle between life and death. In this irreconcilable situation, he found that his South African experience was very valuable and helpful for the survival of British prisoners. The African wisdom, which he had learned from the San/Bushman people, namely, served as a third party to reconcile the oppositions between the East and the West, through which he became a useful mediator between Allied nations' prisoners and Japanese soldiers.

But Laurens van der Post also knew that, in order to serve as a mediator in such a situation, one should be willing to risk one's own life; sacrifices are inevitable in order to overcome any critical situation. This is why we owe our survival to those victims and dead, who, as scapegoats, served as mediators in their attempt to reconcile irreconcilable conditions, and lost their own lives in their act of expiation.

Here, it is in place to evoke the soul of a dead. On July, 12, 1991, Hitoshi Igarashi, aged 44 years old, was found stabbed to death on the campus of Tsukuba University. The Japanese translator of "The Canon of Medicine" by Avicenna (Ibn Sina), Igarashi was known as one of the young leading Islamic scholars in Japan. The year before, he had published his Japanese translation of Saluman Rushdie's controversial novel "Satanic Verses." The publication of this Japanese translation did not fail to provoke manifestations among Moslem immigrants in Japan. Igarashi himself was criticized as a convinced enemy of Islam, which probably also led to his assassination. However, I think he made the translation in an attempt to serve as a mediator in the Rushdie affair, as he publicly declared himself several times.

Firstly, contrary to Western opinion, Igarashi insisted upon the legality of the Fatwa pronounced by the late Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini's religious status and authority had simultaneously justified and requested a publication of the Fatwa in question. But secondly, Igarashi also defended the novel and novelist by locating the writer in the lineage of the Islamic mystical Sufi thought. According to Igarashi, Rushdie was not anti-Islamic, but his passage to England, just like "The Passage to India" by E.M. Foster, represented a literature of exile and could be judiciously compared to the Hejira by Muhammad, to begin with, or to the "Western Exile" in Kairouan by Suhurawardi. By interpreting the Verses as a modern version of Rumi's "Song of a leed," lamenting the separation from [the] God/Creator, Igarashi identified Rushdie among the mystical and heretic poets of Islamic tradition. In an irreconcilable confrontation between the Western value of Freedom of Expression and the Islamic rage against religious profanation, Igarashi, as a Japanese, wished to make an intervention as a third party, through his Japanese translation, so as to put an end to this endless conflict.

3 The case of Igarashi brings me to my third point: tolerance. It is remarkable to notice that some of the participants to this symposium found it intolerable the Saluman Rushdie was not invited to this Conference on Dialogue of Civilizations; and yet, that others would find it intolerable if Rushdie had been present here among the speakers. We know how precarious the condition of a dialogue among civilizations is. Our current symposium is made possible only by repressing and suffocating such irreconcilable oppositions. It was precisely in such a thorny pass that Igarashi hoped to serve as a mediator.

On the one hand, he tried to show to the Western World that freedom of expression should not be understood in an absolute sense. Indeed, when perceived in an absolute sense, freedom can no longer claim

to be freedom. As Michael Ingatieff remarked, freedom must be free from any form of absolutism, including the absolutism of freedom itself; absolutism of freedom being the plain violation of, and contradiction to, freedom. On the other hand, Igarashi also tried to remind the Islamic world to which extent Islam was a tolerable religion. But the irony was, that the Islamic tolerance Igarashi wished to demonstrate was in fact intolerable for those to whom he wanted to display tolerance. ("Sa tolérance était intolérable à ceux envers qui il voulait se montrer tolérant.")

I will now conclude my contribution and make an additional recommendation. I thank Professor Peter Kemp for insisting upon the importance of tolerance. I have to stress that, as a virtue, tolerance is highly vulnerable, for it becomes forceless when confronted with intolerance. If one is tolerant to intolerance, one is forced to accept intolerance; but if one is intolerant to intolerance, one is to provide a double ration to intolerance. Voltaire already pointed this out at the end of the 18th Century. I am afraid humanity has made little progress ever since. Several years ago Paul Ricoeur published a reflection, "L'Intervention: entre la souffrance des victimes et la violence des secours." The ethical dilemma, revealed by Paul Ricoeur in rescue operations, should serve as a starting point of all ethical reflections on tolerance.

My recommendation therefore is to stop talking about tolerance. Instead, we need to think about the conditions for tolerance, because tolerance is never a neutral matter. If tolerance itself is a form of intervention, which necessarily provokes some form of (verbal or physical) violence, by means of passivity or activism (remind the opposition between the Biblical involvement and Confucian reservation), we have to pinpoint the necessary conditions to help realize tolerance, which is a prerequisite to any dialogue among civilizations, in the true sense of the word.

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Kyoto, August. 1-2, 2001