The dialogue of civilizations: Philosophical basis, current state and prospects

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Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War, the “dialogue of civilizations” has become one of the keywords in the global discourse on issues of world order and peace. Traditional enemy stereotypes along the ideological lines of the earlier East-West conflict have disappeared while new confrontational schemes are becoming visible under the slogan of a supposed “clash of civilizations.”

The nature of dialogue consists in the ability to see oneself from the perspective of the other. The human being’s consciousness – self-reflection – is only possible if the subject is aware of the other, i.e. of that which is not the self, that from which it can distinguish itself. Semantically, this is the essence of the Latin word definitio. Applied to the level of civilization, this entails that full understanding and development of any given civilization can only be achieved if the respective civilizational community not only takes note of, but positively interacts with other civilizations on the basis of (normative) equality. Thus, the “dialogue of civilizations” is the fundamental requirement for defining each civilization’s identity and for reaching its maturity and universal relevance.

The common values underlying all civilizations – making possible genuine civilizational progress – are those of tolerance and mutual respect. Acceptance and realization of those values is the necessary, though not the only condition for the adequate self-comprehension and identity of a civilization. In this regard, an analogy can be drawn between (a) the normative equality of civilizations on the socio-cultural level and (b) the concept of the sovereign equality of states on the political level.

One of the most serious threats to international peace and stability, i.e. to the realization of the basic goals of the United Nations Organization, is the persistence – or even creation in certain cases – of enemy stereotypes along civilizational lines. Over the centuries, the demonization or vilification of another civilization (particularly in regard to religious identity) has often been a prelude to armed conflict and has served to create a pretext for – or to legitimize – the violent pursuit of mainly economic interests. At the beginning of the third millennium, the world should not repeat the mistakes of an earlier era. No civilization should try to establish hegemony over the other. The claim
to civilizational superiority has too often been a recipe for confrontation, even armed conflict.

**The dialectical structure of self-consciousness**

The inner logic of self-consciousness of the human being helps to explain the very nature of dialogue among civilizations: reflexion (consciousness) in the sense of critical awareness of myself is only possible if and to the extent in which I know the other, his/her way of life, value system, etc. The identity of the mature person is shaped on the basis of the encounter with the “other,” that which is different of myself (whether in a personal or non-personal form). As explained in the great tradition of the philosophy of the human mind, the subject can only become aware of itself in distinction from an object, that which is not identical with itself.

What is true on the abstract and general level of self-consciousness of the individual, is also true – i.e. applicable – on the level of the collective subject. The community (whether in the form of peoples, national or ethnic or religious communities, etc.) develops its identity through complex interaction with other communities. In addition to this dialectical relationship of self-comprehension on the individual and group level, there exists an interdependence of individual and collective consciousness within each community.

**The philosophical nature of dialogue**

The *conditio sine qua non* for defining a national, ethnic, cultural, or religious community is to relate it, i.e. compare it to other such communities. The very existence and, at the same time, acceptance of the “other” – in this case in the collective, social, or communitarian sense – is the basic precondition for the shaping of the cultural, social, and ethnic identity of any given community – and of the unique identity (personality) of the individuals belonging to the respective community.

Cultures and – more generally – civilizations mutually depend upon each other in order to fully develop their identity and to reach a status of maturity and relevance on a global scale. In conclusion: tolerance is a basic precondition for the development – and advancement – of a civilization, it is the fundamental value shared by all genuine civilizations.

It is the specific task of the philosophy of civilization to analyze and explain the structural relationship between the subject-object dialectic of self-consciousness and the actual requirements of inter-civilizational dialogue.

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