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Prof. Dr. Hans Köchler

President of the International Progress Organization

Chairman, Department of Philosophy, University of Innsbruck, Austria

Dialogue of Civilizations: The Main Challenge of our Time

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(A) Diagnosis of the situation

One of the main characteristics of the new era that began with the end of the Cold War's bipolar world order is that enemy stereotypes have emerged along *civilizational* lines. In structural – or systemic – terms, those attitudes are similar to the earlier *ideological* antagonisms that were the main characteristic of the East-West conflict after World War II.

At first glance, the observer of world affairs, bearing in mind that the polarization of international relations is nothing new, might ask why this development should be so worrisome. The answer lies in the *qualitative difference* between systems of ideology on the one hand and civilization on the other. Because “civilization” – with its specific set of norms – is intrinsically linked to religion and, thus, a community's ultimate and comprehensive world view, much more is at stake in a confrontation between civilizations than in one that is merely related to political ideologies.

In a civilizational context, the “other” – as the potential “enemy” – may acquire an almost *metaphysical* dimension. As history has shown, civilizational antagonism tends towards the total rejection of the other and, thus, leaves no room to compromise. In contemporary world affairs this is evidenced, inter alia, in political terminology such as the terms “axis of evil,” “rogue state,” etc., that are used to describe a threat to one's own civilization and the political system related to it.

Against this background, it is more or less a statement of fact that, at the beginning of the 21st century, the civilizational enemy stereotype is being *instrumentalized* for ulterior motives: (a) for the preservation of global hegemony by the state that benefits from the present unipolar constellation at the global level; and (b) for the justification of unilateral military action (intervention) that serves specific political and economic purposes that are hidden *behind* a civilizational motive. This state of affairs requires a critical evaluation of the “ideological” assumptions underlying these policies.

In more specific terms: the rationale of what is called the “global war on terror” is, to a considerable extent, built on a perceived threat that supposedly emanates from Islam as a civilization, i.e. a value system and way of life that are supposed to be intrinsically hostile to the “Western world” (equated with Western civilization) that characterizes itself as being “free” and “democratic.” It is argued that the former is totally incompatible with a “liberal” world view in general.

Thus, a confrontational agenda is unfolding before our eyes at two levels – something that would have been unimaginable just two decades ago:

- (a) International dimension: We witness a constantly increasing antagonism between the Western and Muslim worlds that is expressed most visibly in international military action in the Middle East and Central Asia, with the potential of *escalation* beyond a point where the hostile exchanges can still be contained. The danger of destabilization of the entire Middle East and the resulting threat to global peace and security are obvious.
- (b) Domestic (national) dimension: We further witness an ever increasing alienation between civilizational (or cultural) communities at the domestic level, particularly (though not exclusively) in Europe. This development has brought about a serious challenge to European states' multicultural societies. The danger of a long-term destabilization of the political systems in Europe – and subsequently of the European Union – cannot be denied. What is at stake here is the very notion of the nation-state which has been a cornerstone of European political identity. How the European Union will deal with these tensions affecting the cohesion and political stability of its member states will be of crucial importance for Europe's future as a global actor. A "state of emergency" resulting from inter-civilizational tensions at the domestic level would further threaten major achievements in terms of human rights and jeopardize the legitimacy – or credibility – of the "European model" as one to be emulated in other parts of the world.

Both dimensions – domestic and international – are interconnected and reveal mutually reinforcing conflict tendencies.

Against the backdrop of escalating conflicts at different levels and in different regions, the paradigm of the "clash of civilizations," launched at the beginning of the 1990s as a kind of "successor" of the Cold War's enemy stereotype, has almost become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In a context of almost Machiavellian-style international politics, where "might makes right," the emphasis on this paradigm continues to sow distrust among states and peoples alike and further fuels traditional, long-standing conflicts with a kind of

“civilizational fervor.” The most obvious examples are the conflict over sovereignty in Palestine, including Jerusalem, or clashes of interest over access to Middle Eastern energy resources – disputes that all date back to the Cold War era. The underlying rhetoric reveals an essentially irrational attitude that goes against all principles cherished by the West as achievement of Enlightenment. In a sense, the emotions triggered by this process of alienation between civilizations appear to revive the spirit of the medieval “crusades.” The term “crusade” has indeed actually been used by some political leaders in the wake of the events of 2001.

(B) Civilizational dialogue as alternative

It is against this bleak picture of confrontation, resulting from an increasing alienation between civilizations and cultures, that the dialogue of civilizations has become the main challenge of our time, indeed the only way out of the existing dilemma:

- (a) The *future of world order* will depend on the launching and political implementation of an alternative paradigm to that of the so-called “clash of civilizations.” Emphasis on this requirement is not just talk about a lofty, abstract *ideal*, but a very *real* political need. The unfolding of a confrontation along civilizational lines has made the development of an agenda of dialogue the main imperative of international as well as domestic politics. It is here where the “Alliance of Civilizations” initiative, sponsored by Turkey and Spain and endorsed by the United Nations Organization, comes into play. And it is here where the initiative of the New Azerbaijan Party of bringing together political parties from all regions of the globe proves its relevance for global peace and security.
- (b) Interaction, especially between the Muslim world and the West, on the basis of the paradigm of dialogue is indeed a question of war and peace. “Peace in our time” can only be secured and further preserved if the world’s great civilizations reach a *basic* – or *strategic* – understanding on the fundamental norms which govern the global order – and when and if they define interaction among themselves on the basis of

mutuality, i.e. of the mutual, or reciprocal, recognition of civilizational rights. Such a move would be in clear distinction from the essentially imperialistic *missionary* approach of the colonial era or from the *patronizing* attitude on the part of the dominating powers which we witness in today's global discourse about good politics and a just world order.

Only “civilizational rapprochement” – which must not be confused with an amalgamation or forced integration of one civilization into the other – can lay the foundations for a stable political order at the international level. Such a process alone will enable political leaders to critically analyze the complex structures of mistrust and suspicion between civilizations as they exist today and gradually disentangle themselves from the confrontationist agenda into which they have been drawn with increasing frequency. In a context of armed confrontations that are being conducted with civilizational undertones and justified by reference to civilizational self-assertion, this self-reflexion is not easy to accomplish. However, there is no way out of this impasse of a virtually perpetual confrontation at the global level unless one gets away from the paradigm of the “clash of civilizations.”

To draft a new agenda of civilizational dialogue is indeed the major challenge to be met – and managed – by the world's political leaders, and in particular by the *political parties* as agents of public policy that have special responsibilities for the future of the countries and peoples they serve. Only through steadfast commitment to the well-being of the nations they belong to – which, however, must never come at the expense of other nations' and civilizations' right to self-realization – will they contribute to the *bonum commune* (common good) of mankind as a whole.

Implementation of such a goal is not an easy task. Under the specific circumstances at the beginning of the 21st century, promoting the agenda of dialogue also implies that political leaders and parties *oppose* the confrontationist agenda that is being pursued by certain political quarters for the sake of short-sighted electoral politics.

This obligation also applies to countries and political forces in the Western world, in particular in the European Union. It would be rather hypocritical, on the part of the European political establishment, to constantly point the finger in the direction of “the others,” who, in most cases, are identified as the countries and peoples of the Muslim world. Exclusively blaming the Islamic civilization for the antagonistic situation that

characterizes today's global politics (see Samuel Huntington's dictum of the "bloody borders of Islam") is neither credible nor can it be a successful strategy in view of the political dilemmas of Europe's multicultural societies. Unfortunately, but with increasing frequency, the representative electoral system in Europe is being *abused* for short-term political gain: Certain (political) parties deliberately exploit civilizational, ethnic and cultural prejudices for electoral purposes; they even stir up such sentiments (e.g. Islamophobia or, more precisely, anti-Islamism) in order to present themselves as "saviors" from an imminent danger. Regrettably, the Christian churches have failed to condemn such practices publicly and unambiguously. One of the most obvious examples is the Pope's Regensburg speech (with its quote of an extremely derogatory characterization of Islam by a Byzantine emperor) which was quickly interpreted by certain party leaders in Europe as endorsement of their xenophobic policies.

The *fundamental challenge* that lies in the promotion of a dialogue of civilizations under today's *adverse* circumstances of growing conflict corresponds to the *noble duty* of political leaders to act for the common good – at the domestic, regional and global levels. Political parties have to live up to the greatest threat to the stability of the 21st century's international order. The challenges are not merely about economic stability and development. What is at stake here, is *global peace*.

If the trend towards a "clash of civilizations" is allowed to further take hold, i.e. if the tide of inter-civilizational violence is not stemmed, this will mean perpetual confrontation – or more precisely: a self-perpetuating war along civilizational lines. Because this kind of confrontation, based on a fundamental alienation between civilizational value systems and world perceptions, implies the notion of the enemy as "absolute evil," as a threat to "civilization as such," war would acquire an almost metaphysical dimension which touches upon the very essence of *humanity* (of being human). In this confrontational context, equality is denied to the "other" civilization which, thus, is being vilified as something totally alien to one's own understanding of humanity. Herein also lies the real danger of advocating a so-called "global war on terror" as a war against evil – a war which, almost by definition, can never be won and which not only would *divide* the world again, but would jeopardize everything the world has achieved after the threat of nuclear war had ceased with the end of the East-West conflict.

In order to contain this new and imminent threat to global order, the political parties on all sides have to act and join forces before it is too late – and before the "civilizational

divide” (which is conjured up by influential groups in different countries) becomes reality. They should establish a global network of forces supporting dialogue – and isolate those who deliberately exploit civilizational prejudice.

We must not allow that what, in fact, constitutes the greatest opportunity for the advancement of mankind – namely *civilization* as the supreme and most comprehensive expression of man’s encounter with the world – is becoming the most serious threat to the human race’s survival, simply because it is instrumentalized for the purposes of international power politics. In today’s global environment, we must not allow issues of civilizational identity and self-assertion to become causes of armed confrontation. Herein lies the fundamental challenge faced by those who are committed to the *preservation of peace* in an era in which cultural and civilizational *multipolarity* stands in contrast with political *unipolarity* – a goal which corresponds to the noble mission of political parties worldwide to make the agenda of civilizational dialogue an intrinsic element of their political message.
