



Ramin Jahanbegloo

Beyond the clash of intolerances

Today, we are not experiencing a clash of civilizations, but a clash of intolerances, writes Ramin Jahanbegloo. "We must encourage opposing forces to adhere to values of moderation, tolerance, and non-violence", claims the Teheran academic and philosopher, who is currently under arrest in Iran.

The "dialogue of civilizations" has become one of the keywords in the global discourse on issues of cultural globalization and international conflict resolution. However, the disappearance of traditional stereotypes that existed along the ideological lines of the Cold War era has given birth to a new confrontational scheme, which is visible under the idea of clash of civilizations. This new form of ideological friction may well turn into a real and serious conflict, particularly when acts of violence are given a religious dimension, thus potentially triggering a sequence of events that may elude political rationality. Ever since the conflict between the Achaemenid Empire of Persia and the city-states of Ancient Greece, clashes between civilizations has been a major and very familiar theme of world history. If, however, the energy released when two cultures clash could be channelled in the right direction, contact between two different cultures could provide a golden opportunity for the birth of constructive self-reflection. People would be able to examine their own cultural framework in the light of a different one, and if such an experiment succeeds, not only will conflict be avoided, but also an opportunity will be created to broaden a culture's intellectual horizons.

In fact, it is not that hard to find examples in history of the way in which a clash of civilizations has led to dialogue on a higher level. The example and paradigm of Al-Andalus is particularly relevant concerning the dialogue among cultures. What was remarkable about religious and cultural life in Islamic Spain is that in their intense and rich dialogue, Jews, Christians and Muslims were not aiming at converting one another to their respective faiths so much as trying to deepen their understanding and convince themselves of the truth of their own beliefs. I think we all agree that at the core of the Cordoba experience is to be found not intolerance but an aspiration to the universal and a respect for diversity. While Europe was darkened at sunset, Cordoba, the seat of the Muslim Moorish Empire in Spain, was lit by street lamps. Europeans bathed in streams and lakes; the citizens of Cordoba had over a thousand baths. Europe was covered with vermin; people in Muslim Spain changed their undergarments daily. Europeans walked in mud; Cordoba's streets were paved. Europe's palaces had smoke holes in the ceiling; Cordoba's arabesque architecture was exquisite.

When Europe's nobility could not sign its name, Cordoba's children went to school. When Europe's monks could not read the baptismal service, Cordoba's teachers created a library with over two million books on every subject of human life. This is a small page of European history which European scholars

choose to either ignore completely or mention fleetingly in their history books. In this modern age of Western global dominance, we often hear how civilized, democratic, humane, tolerant, and enlightened Europe is and has been compared to barbaric, primitive, violent, and Middle Aged thinking, Muslims. Throughout the Middle Ages, Jews and Muslims borrowed a great deal from each other in the areas of philosophy, science, mysticism, and law. For example, Maimonides was deeply influenced by our Muslim philosophers, while many in the Islamic world to this day read Maimonides as an Arab thinker. One outstanding example of religious cooperation was the mosque of Cordoba, which was used on Fridays for prayers by Muslims, on Saturdays by the Jewish community, and on Sundays by the Christians. That was truly an open society, created by an atmosphere of togetherness no matter what religion people had. In Muslim Spain, for a period of almost eight hundred years, a society existed in which Muslims, Jews and Christians lived together in peaceful co-existence, sharing knowledge, culture and understanding.

One of the fundamental problems frequently encountered in a dialogue situation is the tendency to compare the ideals of one's own faith with the practices of the other and vice versa. This approach is adopted primarily to put down and degrade the other. Such an approach not only prohibits understanding and genuine conversation across religious boundaries, it also leads to the unnecessary glorification of one's own faith and sacred texts. Actually the true problem starts when those on both sides begin to believe that a balance between the two is impossible and that a clash is inevitable. When this happens, they stop listening to each other and begin dehumanizing one another, making a clash ever more likely. Unless and until the three Abrahamic faiths discover a new paradigm of religious life that honours diversity as part of human religiosity, they will compete and civilizations will be in conflict. This new paradigm cannot be taught, but can be discovered. And the way to discover it is to dare to dive into a deep inter-faith experience with the world's contemplative traditions.

The contemplative side of religion always leads to a sense of humility. The great mystics of every faith understood that God was greater than any faith. By immersing people in the contemplative traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and by cultivating the spiritual humility that nurtures a paradigm of holy diversity and mutual respect (as opposed to mere tolerance) the world can move beyond the clash of civilizations toward a new era of global dialogue and peaceful inter-spiritual cooperation. Today, we are not experiencing a clash of civilizations, so much as a clash of intolerances. Intolerance is mainly the inability or unwillingness to endure something different. Intolerance of other people who are different from us is obviously prevalent in our modern societies. This is not only about moral intolerance or political intolerance. It is simply about intolerance of anyone who is in any way different than us. Ever since the tragic event of 9/11, there has been an increasing number of racial attacks against Muslims, Sikhs, or anybody else from a Middle Eastern or Asian background. Also, careless remarks about Islam and Muslims by politicians and the media have helped to fan the flames of hatred and fear among different communities of believers around the world. But intolerance against Muslims goes hand in hand with the demonization of the West by Muslim fundamentalists.

While many Muslims acknowledge the support and sensitivity of most Westerners, some Muslims continue to embarrass everyone with the narrowness of their vision and the crudeness of their sentiments in relation to the West. The agenda seems to be the same on both sides: promoting a

generalized conflict between the Islamic world and the West. But who has the greatest duty to stop this clash of intolerances committed in the name of Islam and western civilization? The answer, obviously, is Muslims and non-Muslims who are against superficial and apocalyptic depictions of a world divided. Any solution to contemporary clash of intolerances must take recourse to fighting the crazed nationalism, tribal hatred, and religious and ethnic intolerance and encouraging the opposing forces to adhere to values of moderation, tolerance and non-violence. It is difficult to reconcile the idea of dialogue among cultures with the contemporary theory that non-violence is simply a strategy of convenience.

Non-violence is not a shirt that one can wear today and take off tomorrow. Practicing non-violence has become a practical necessity in international relations. Just as we are required to create a whole culture of violence around us, we need to create a culture of non-violence and toleration around us to practice dialogue. The injunction to be tolerant and non-violent can mean only, of course, that we should exercise tolerance and non-violence if and when confronted by ideas or actions of which we disapprove or even consider to be hateful, in the same way as the principle of freedom of speech makes sense only if it is also applied to those who say things we ourselves view as being wrong. For, obviously, there is no particular difficulty nor particular merit, and thus no special spiritual effort required, to tolerate what we consider good and right and what accords with our own idiosyncrasies, in the same way as there is no particular merit tolerating people whose views happen to coincide with our own. And yet, as the whole history abundantly proves, we cannot and we should not tolerate the inhuman.

Tolerating the inhuman leads only to more inhuman. He who passively accepts the inhuman is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. Non-violent dialogue is the best way to protest against the inhuman without being indifferent to it. That is to say, if inter-cultural dialogue is to be authentically itself, it must be accompanied, supported, and challenged by a dialogical tolerance. Differing from a dialectical tolerance, in which each voice is locked within pre-established point of views, and differing from an eclectic tolerance, a dialogical tolerance involves both self-other and self-self. The self encounters someone who is both other and self. This recalls a beautiful poem by T.S. Eliot published in the Four Quartets, where the character of a philosopher-poet hears within himself the voice of another person and says: "Although we were not. I was still the same. Knowing myself yet being someone other." The someone other who is both there and not, like the voice of another culture or another religion which comes to us and asks us to be open to the possibilities of the other's thinking, as well as to the voice of the dialogue itself. This attitude of openness suggests that participants in a dialogue must believe that each other's worldviews are capable of being understood. In other words, there could be no inter-cultural dialogue between cultures that constitute hermetically sealed chambers of meaning. Rather, they must assume that their worldviews are open horizons. Toshihiko Izutsu uses the expression "fusion of horizons" to describe the way in which contact between two opposed cultural frameworks can result in both attaining a new perspective on the world above and beyond their existing world views.

If one is talking here in terms of principles and spirit, this comment would apply not only at the level of culture but also civilization; surely what is called for today is such a fusion of horizons — the key to changing a clash of civilizations into a dialogue between them. If efforts were made throughout the world, between all cultures, to attain a "fusion of horizons", then we would at

last be achieving globalization in the true sense of the word. Therefore, the aim in conducting a dialogue between cultures is not to create a world of uniform thought and culture, but ideally the exact opposite. Cultural dialogue should be nothing less than a mechanism for enriching the individuality and world view of people, whether they are from America or an Islamic community. Any culture tends to possess a framework which determines the basic form of the behaviour, thoughts, and emotions of the people belonging to that culture. The people belonging to a certain culture base their ideas, feelings and behaviour on the framework of that culture.

Dialogical understanding demands that members of different cultures actively engage each other in real dialogue, listen to what the others say, and reach partial agreements about the meaning of the perspectives communicated. Importantly, this also means questioning another culture, not avoiding it. Critical questioning remains part of the process of intercultural dialogue. But coming to know what one does not know should remind us of the wisdom of Socrates. Although Socratic questioning was motivated by his admission of ignorance, it also enabled criticism of the values and beliefs of his interlocutors by drawing on their own inconsistencies. By pointing out the limits of Theatetus' knowledge, Socrates believes that the young man may become gentler with his own colleagues. Similarly, when we portray intercultural dialogue as an open-ended questioning, participants encourage each other to experience their cultural views as open to revision. A cross-cultural conversation, even with an inflexible "other", offers the speakers the advantages of both self-discovery and of possibly learning another aspect of a greater, more complex truth. The aim is not to get necessarily to an agreement between persons holding fundamentally different opinions. The goal is to get a sense of empathy and solidarity for the world. We can no longer preach any form of cultural homogenization, nor advocate a view of radical difference.

The world is diverse and it is important to respect diversity. But neither international laws nor international institutions are sufficient to ensure peace and dialogue in our contemporary world. We need to cultivate a dialogical co-existence, which is only possible when there is interest in listening and understanding the other side's point of view, and respect for that which it holds as vital to its cultural identity. These are the basic premises and main goals of a non-violent dialogue of cultures. But we also need to understand that in today's world, the spiral of hatred and violence constitutes a huge threat not only to international peace but also to human destiny. It's time to realize that we find ourselves in the process of a major change. Democratization of intolerance has become the rule of social behaviour. Paradoxically, the notion of tolerance preached by all religions and cultures, is turned into intolerance within the confines of particularistic politics.

We need to think beyond this over-determined binary opposition of the "West" and the "Rest" which seems to suggest that the "rest of the world" has nothing to say about the West. Such an affirmation would deny the pluralistic essence of the western civilization. If the West starts acting as the Taliban, ignoring the fact that it has within it a diversity of views and cultures, it is bound to betray its own liberal roots and democratic aims. However, there is a possibility to coexist in an increasingly intolerant world. We can start from the premise that human dignity is too great to be captured in one culture. In other words, each culture nurtures and develops some dimension of human dignity; progress will always come from a dialogue between cultures. So if the West is asking Islam to stamp out its intolerances, it has no lesser duty to do the same. Muslims need the West to find a balance between democracy and responsibility; the

West can learn from Islam in its sense of community.

Mahatma Gandhi, a relevant figure for our times, fought against intolerance his whole life. Every action of his was to create harmony among cultures and individuals. Gandhi best spoke of this dialogue of cultures and exchange of ideas of when he said, "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible." What a challenge these words are for us who are struggling against the clash of intolerances. If the world is seeking a way out of the clash of intolerances, the best way is to defend one's freedom of expression without disrespecting other peoples' opinions. The true nature of dialogue consists in the ability to see oneself from the perspective of the other. It is certainly true that there are forces within one's own culture that prevent that engagement. There is a danger of reading something in other cultures or religions that is simply not there. But that is the risk of any dialogue. If there is any deconstructing that needs to be done in order to enter properly into a dialogue with other cultures, it is one that seeks to purge the aspects of our own culture and consciousness that are violent and destructive.

For the relevant question does not concern what we should believe, but what we should do about our beliefs. This was the task accomplished by great historical figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Abdul Ghaffar Khan. Let me take this opportunity to salute the legacy of Abdul Ghaffar Khan, better known as Badshah Khan, who died in 1988 in Peshawar, at the age of ninety-eight. Badshah Khan is no longer with his people, but his lifelong sufferings in the service of Pashtuns will remain a great source of inspiration. Abdul Ghaffar Khan's profound belief in the truth and effectiveness of non-violence came from the depths of personal experience of his Muslim faith. His life testifies to the reality that being a non-violent and being a Muslim are perfectly compatible. "Today's world is travelling in some strange direction", Abdul Ghaffar Khan said in 1985: "You see that the world is going toward destruction and violence. And the speciality of violence is to create hatred among people and to create fear. I am a believer in non-violence and I say that no peace or tranquillity will descend upon the people of the world until non-violence is practiced, because non-violence is love and it stirs courage in people." The legacy of Abdul Ghaffar Khan may be of help to all of us today in the task of overcoming clashes of intolerance between Islam and the West and between Muslims and Hindus in the subcontinent. His bridge-building life is a clear and transparent affirmation that dialogue, peace, and cultural co-existence are possible beyond the clash of civilizations.

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