

THIRD INFORMAL THEMATIC DEBATE OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY DURING THE 61ST SESSION

Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace: obstacles and opportunities

I. Introduction

The President of the General Assembly, H.E. Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa, invited Member States and observers to an informal thematic debate of the General Assembly “Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace: obstacles and opportunities”, on 10 and 11 May 2007. In her opening remarks, the President of the General Assembly characterized the informal thematic debate as a genuine attempt:

“ ... to understand the realities we live in and analyze more fully the reasons behind the increasing levels of conflict, alienation, extremism and fear in the world, so that we can lay a solid foundation for a genuine dialogue between cultures and religions and bridge the rift that is on the verge of deepening”.

Addressing the meeting, the Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon underlined the:

“... urgent need to rebuild bridges and to enter into a sustained and constructive intercultural dialogue that stresses common values and shared aspirations” for which the Assembly provided a unique platform, and that he awaited the outcome of the meeting which would “inform his thinking and help guide the work of the UN”.

The debate consisted of four interactive panel discussions:

- Respect for Cultural Diversity as a Prerequisite for Dialogue
- Religion in Contemporary Society
- The Responsibility of the Media
- Civilizations and the Challenge for Global Peace and Security

II. Panel discussions

1. Respect for Cultural Diversity as a Prerequisite for Dialogue

Respect for cultural diversity as a prerequisite for dialogue was widely supported. It was also acknowledged that this by itself was not sufficient to achieve meaningful intercultural dialogue. Beyond respect and tolerance, three other factors were required for dialogue: recognition of the other’s otherness; recognition of the legitimate assertion of the other’s identity; and openness to the transformative effect dialogue can have on identity.

Many underlined the need for greater respect, tolerance and dialogue among cultures, religions and civilizations; that the process of globalization had provided greater opportunities for interaction, but had also increased the “otherness of others”. Cultural diversity was viewed as a global asset that enriched everyone. The possibility of “unity in diversity” was also stressed. In this sense, the use of the word “civilizations” could be misleading as humanity has a common civilization.

While religions could be instrumentalized, for good or bad purposes, it was wrong to confuse religion with culture, as most religions were trans-cultural. Education was mentioned as the most effective tool for countering intolerance. Some also stressed the importance of universal human rights.

The role the UN in fostering and deepening dialogue was discussed. Dialogue could play an important role in the maintenance of peace and conflict prevention, though many suggested that dialogue could never substitute for conflict resolution.

Recommendations

- the High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations should play a prominent role in promoting meaningful intercultural dialogue.
- create an umbrella structure within the United Nations to promote the Alliance of Civilizations initiative.

2. Religion in Contemporary Society

The role of religion as a powerful source of identity both historically and in contemporary society was highlighted. In that context, the importance of dialogue among religions, as a key to developing a global identity and a sense of global citizenship, was emphasized. It was also noted that true dialogue can only take place among parties that view each other as equals, and that fostering space for such a dialogue was needed.

Many noted the manipulation of religion for political purposes. In view of the tendency of institutions to claim the right to maintain their own structure and precepts, the challenge for religious institutions to engage in more effective dialogue was noted. Absolutist views, fundamentalism, and ignorance of the history and culture of diverse religious groups were also highlighted as obstacles. Some challenged religious and cultural leaders to motivate their followers to engage ‘others’ more reasonably and with greater mutual respect, while remaining true to themselves and their own beliefs.

Noting that conflicts and tensions arose from believers, not from the religions themselves, the need to improve adherence to the core values of one’s own tradition was signaled. Recognition of the impact of recent history, notably the transition from colonialism to independence, was underscored as a missing component in most debates on the role of religion in contemporary society. It was also acknowledged that dialogue and non-

violence were the appropriate vehicles for addressing challenges, such as poverty and oppression.

It was emphasized that academic analyses of religion in contemporary society take into account the views of the members of the religion in question, and avoid simplified explanations based on superficial understanding.

The adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was cited as an important example of how inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogues can indeed overcome great challenges and contribute towards building peace.

The role of the United Nations in fostering greater awareness among the broader public at the local, national and global levels was widely supported, including by members of the NGO community who expressed their commitment to work through the established mechanisms, with Member States, to further the debate.

Recommendations:

- religious communities should be encouraged to build bridges at the local level, in order to counter extremism.
- the United Nations should hold regular debates with religious movements and academics, so that decision making processes are better informed by those who can offer a critical perspective and provide in depth knowledge of the history, culture, ethnic and religious specificity of the society in question.
- leaders and educators should find resources *within their own traditions* for promoting respect and tolerance.
- the tools made available by information technology should be utilized more effectively to promote greater dialogue and understanding, especially among young people.
- the Secretary-General should appoint an Adviser on Religious matters.

3. The Responsibility of the Media

Many participants noted that the media had a responsibility to support and encourage dialogue in an ethical manner, especially since for many people the media was the biggest source of knowledge about the world. The importance of public debates was emphasized.

The need to give high priority to media literacy in the context of the rise of interactive network journalism (e.g. radio phone-ins, web forums and blogs) that create active spaces

for discussion was suggested. The need for better education and training of journalists was highlighted. The new world of online media was seen as a positive structural development. However, participants deplored the current technological divide, with vast parts of the world still lacking internet access.

Some cautioned against “political correctness” by the media as this would not allow for the true communication and permanent dialogue that was necessary. There was a discussion about whether “the media fed the flames or extinguished fires” and therefore if it was leading the world towards greater understanding or towards greater strife.

There were divergent views about the appropriate relationship between governments and international organizations and the media. Some participants cautioned against the risk of infringing on the universal principle of freedom of expression, arguing that the role of the media should be defined by the media and not by governments or by international bodies. In this context, the existence of large media corporations was seen as a guarantee of press freedom. Meanwhile, the presence of many small media operators was also seen as a sign of the vitality and independence of the press.

Central in the debate was the question of the press’ objectivity, as well as media ownership. It was stressed that the ideal role of the media was to present information in an objective fashion, leaving the public to form its own opinion. In practice, however, journalists worked for corporations with interests. The question was therefore raised about how that affected the objectivity of journalism.

Recommendations

- adopt a universal, international code of conduct to ensure that the media enjoy their freedom of speech with a sense of ethical responsibility.
- priority should be given to investment in media literacy given the various technological transformations that are underway.

4. Civilizations and the Challenge for Global Peace and Security

The view that all human traditions, cultures, civilizations and religions together form one human civilization was expressed. The role of education in promoting diversity and fostering a sense of belonging to one human community was emphasized. In addition, it was acknowledged that diversity was a strength which all of humanity can benefit from; and that each person has multiple identities which society must respect and allow to flourish. In a similar vein, it was noted that perceived differences in ethnicity must be consciously unlearned to prevent hatred and the denial other people’s humanity, an attitude which could eventually lead to cases of genocide, as recent history has demonstrated.

It was pointed out that to achieve results, education must be complemented by concrete efforts to alleviate inequalities. Many supported the view that global economic

inequalities were an important source for extremism. It was proposed that the United Nations prepare a study on circumstances under which extremists are recruited. Some, however, argued that ignorance was the main source of the current predicament between the “West” and “Islam” and that extremists on both sides reinforced each other.

Participants called for collective efforts in order to reduce tensions within and between nations. It was emphasized that the world was not doomed to witness a clash of civilizations. There was unanimous recognition that extremism was unacceptable in any form and that more needed to be done to counter it.

Many speakers expressed concern over the use of religion as a cover to legitimize violence. The need for political solutions based on the strict adherence to international law was seen as a guarantee against double standards. The virtue of dialogue as a means to counter extremism was stressed.

It was suggested that the United Nations Security Council should hold a debate on the so-called clash of civilizations. Both support and opposition to this proposal was expressed. It was indicated by some that the right forum for such a debate should be the General Assembly. Some speakers noted that the debate focused solely on the “Abrahamic faiths” and that other religious traditions, especially from Asia, had been neglected. It was therefore pointed out that a dialogue of civilizations must encompass all cultural and religious traditions.

Many speakers welcomed the appointment by the Secretary-General of a High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations and expressed support for his work. The announcement of the first World Forum on the Alliance of Civilizations devoted to young people which would be convened in Spain before the end of this year was well received.

Finally, the role of the UN as an indispensable forum to debate this important matter and to take collective measures with a view to mitigating the negative impact of extremism on societies was recognized.

Recommendations

- efforts to promote education as an effective means to fight ignorance must be pursued;
- conduct a UN study on the sources of all forms of extremism, at both national and international level;
- a fruitful dialogue of civilizations must encompass all cultural and religious traditions;
- the UN, given its unique convening power, must continue to promote dialogue between civilizations and religions with a wide range of stakeholders, including civil society and the NGOs.

Annex A

Informal Thematic Debate of the General Assembly
Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace: Obstacles and Opportunities
10 and 11 May 2007
Trusteeship Council Chamber, United Nations

Introductory statements by the President of the General Assembly, the Secretary-General and Panelists are available online at;

<http://www.un.org/ga/president/61/follow-up/thematic-civilizations/programme.shtml>

Thursday 10 May

10.00 AM-10.30 AM

- **Opening Statement by the President of the General Assembly**
- **Statement by the Secretary General of the United Nations**

Panel 1 - *Respect for Cultural Diversity is a prerequisite for Dialogue*

10.30 am - 1.00 pm

- Dr. Ghassan Salame
Professor of International Relations at Sciences Po University, Former Minister of Culture of Lebanon
- Rev. Canon Dr. Trond Bakkevig
Pastor of the Lutheran Church of Norway
- Ms. Fatemeh Keshavarz-Karamustafa
Professor of Persian and Comparative Literature
Chair, Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages & Literatures
University of Washington
- Ms. Regine Boucard - Moderator
West African Museum Program, former President of the World Bank Art Society

Panel 2 – *Religion in Contemporary Society*

3.00 pm – 6.00 pm

- Mr. Mohamed Arkoun
Emeritus Professor of the History of Islamic Thought at the Sorbonne
- Mr. Manish Kasliwal
National Chairman, Young Jains of India
- Ms. Mary Ann Glendon
Learned Hand Professor of Law, Harvard Law School
- Dr. Hune Margulies
Director, the Martin Buber Institute for Dialogical Ecology
- Mr. Robert Thurman – Moderator
Chair, Department of Religious Studies, Columbia University

Friday 11 May 2007

Panel 3 – The Responsibility of the Media

10.00 am – 1.00 pm

- Ms. Robin Mansell
Professor of new Media, Head of the Department of New Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science
- Dr. Mohamed Al Rumaihi
Professor of Political Sociology, Kuwait University
- Ms. Mona Siddiqui Professor of Islamic Studies and Public Understanding, University of Glasgow
- Mr. Warren Hoge - Moderator
New York Times, United Nations Bureau Chief

Panel 4 – Civilizations and the Challenge for Global Peace and Security

3.00 pm – 6.00 pm

- Mr. Souleymane Bachir Diagne
Northwestern University
- Mr. Amre Moussa
Secretary-General, League of Arab States
- Ms. Karen Armstrong
Author on religion, television broadcaster
- Mr. Shashi Tharoor - Moderator
Author and Former United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information

Concluding remarks by the President of the General Assembly