



Civilizational Dialogue and World Order

The Other Politics of Cultures,
Religions, and Civilizations in
International Relations

Edited by Michális S. Michael and Fabio Petito



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CIVILIZATIONAL DIALOGUE AND WORLD ORDER

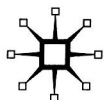
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Since the designation of 2001 as the UN Year of Dialogue among Civilizations and the events of September 11, dialogue has become a recurring and often controversial theme in international discourse. For its advocates, the dialogue of cultures, religions and civilizations offers one of the more promising contributions to public debate on how we diagnose the present and plan for the future... If dialogue is an idea whose time has come, it is necessary to develop a clearer understanding of the nature of dialogue.

With these words, La Trobe University's Centre for Dialogue convened on December 12–13, 2006 in Melbourne an international two-day conference entitled "The Politics of Empire and the Culture of Dialogue: Intellectual and Organisational Signposts for the Future." Attended by some of the world's leading scholars in this area, the workshop concluded with a call for serious reflection on the significance of a civilizational dialogue for the future of world order.

This book has its genesis in this workshop and is, to a large extent, a fitting outcome for a Center whose aim it is to further develop both the theory and practice of dialogue. In this regard we would like to thank all those at the Centre for Dialogue (notably Ben Zala, James Oaten, Christine Siokou, George Myconos) who made the 2006 workshop a success. A special thanks is, however, reserved for its director and our very good friend, Professor Joseph Camilleri. Without Professor Camilleri's contribution, we can unequivocally say that neither the workshop nor this book would have been possible.

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii

Notes on Contributors ix

Introduction

- 1 Imperial Monologue or Civilizational Dialogue? 3
Michális S. Michael and Fabio Petito

Part I The Relevance of Civilizational Dialogue for World Order

- 2 Justice and Cross-Cultural Dialogue:
From Theory to Practice 29
Fred R. Dallmayr
- 3 Dialogue of Civilizations as an Alternative Model for
World Order 47
Fabio Petito
- 4 Dialogue among and within Faiths: Weaving a
Culture of Peace 69
Toh Swee-Hin (S. H. Toh)

Part II Locating Civilizational Dialogue in International Relations

- 5 Civilizationism and the Political Debate on Globalization 93
Raffaele Marchetti
- 6 Anti-Cosmopolitanism, the Cosmopolitan
Harm Principle and Global Dialogue III
Richard Shapcott

- 7 Finding Appropriate Forms of Dialogue for
Engaging with the Politics of Security 129
Phillip Darby

**Part III Civilizational Dialogue between Empire and
Resistance in the Post-September 11 Context**

- 8 Monologue of Empire versus Global Dialogue of
Cultures: The Branding of "American Values" 147
Manfred B. Steger
- 9 Terror, Counterterror, and Self Destruction:
Living with Regimes of Narcissism and Despair 167
Ashis Nandy
- 10 *Quo Vadis*, the Dialogue of Civilizations?
September 11 and Muslim-West Relations 181
Chandra Muzaffar

**Part IV Cross-Cultural Dialogue in
the Context of Civilizational Encounters**

- 11 Openness and the Dialogue of
Civilizations—a Chinese Example 201
Zhang Longxi
- 12 From Tension to Dialogue? The Mediterranean between
European Civilization and the Muslim World 217
Armando Salvatore
- 13 History, Memory, and the Dialogue of Civilizations:
The Case of Northeast Asia 239
Michael T. Seigel

Bibliography 263

Index 283



INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER I

IMPERIAL MONOLOGUE OR CIVILIZATIONAL DIALOGUE?

Michális S. Michael and Fabio Petito

On a brisk autumn afternoon as community activists congregated at the forecourt of the Darebin Town Hall for an interfaith dialogue, few would have noticed the auspicious monument towering over them. Erected in ostentatious Victorian grandeur, steeped in transient nationalist mystique, and draped by the names of young Anglo-Celtic men, the RSL (Returned and Services League of Australia) memorial honors those “who fought (and died)...for King and Empire” during “the Great War 1914–1918.” Some 2400 years earlier, in another encounter of dialogue and empire, Athenian envoys advocated the pervasiveness of power and pragmatism against the besieged Melians’ contestations for justice and neutrality.¹

Partitioned by memory and history, what appear as two unrelated parables conveniently usher us into the foray that interfaces empire with dialogue. Since time immemorial, empire has been a metaphor for unadulterated power, whereas the philosophical inclination of dialogue lends itself as a conduit to peace. Until the end of the Cold War, both empire and dialogue were viewed through the prisms and the ideological apparatus of the bipolar confrontation. In the post-Cold War era this tension seems to have reached a different level of intensity with a distinctive civilizational connotation.

In this respect, September 11 exacerbated a deeper crisis of order that came to the fore with the collapse of the Cold War bipolar system, but was never far from the surface throughout the twentieth century in the dissolution of the forms and rules of international coexistence. It is, however, in the context of the post-Cold War debate on a future

world order that “dialogue of civilizations” emerged as a discourse, often generic but increasingly professed as a political necessity to oppose the “monologue of Empire.” More specifically, the global discourse of civilizational dialogue emerged against the background of two competing and powerful discourses, the “Clash of Civilizations” and the “Globalization of Liberalism.”²

It is well-known that credit for the popularization of “dialogue of civilizations” belongs to Mohammad Khatami who, as President of Iran, used this formulation to secure the unanimous designation of 2001 as the United Nations (UN) Year of the “Dialogue among Civilizations.”³ In the same year, the tragic coincidence of September 11 catapulted to the fore of world consciousness the “civilizational debate” with even more urgency.

Civilizational Dialogue and the Western-Centric Matrix of International Relations

Since the developments discussed above, the idea of a dialogue of civilizations has been the subject of numerous conferences and international meetings, but it has received little attention by international relations and political theorists as a framework for the future of international relations—this is even more regretful when one considers that Khatami explicitly intended his proposal as “an alternative paradigm for international relations.”⁴

Even after September 11, the idea of a dialogue of civilizations remained largely unexplored by the academic community despite frequently being used as a rhetorical antithesis to the popularized thesis of the clash of civilizations—often providing a convenient catchphrase to criticize Samuel P. Huntington or to refer to some sort of undefined normative political necessity to avoid a clash.⁵

True, academic reaction to the “clash of civilizations” thesis has been extensive, ranging from mainstream international relations to post-positivist approaches, through analytical philosophy to continental political theory, historical analysis, anthropological insights, literary criticism, and even theological arguments. However, such critique, particularly in Western literature, has rarely involved a substantial engagement with the idea of “dialogue of civilizations.” Put differently, there appears to have been a “suspicious double movement” that, on one hand, reacts against the clash of civilizations thesis, whilst, on the other, remains indifferent to the idea of a dialogue of civilizations and its possibilities.