

Opinion

The Year 2001: The Start of a Creative Dialogue Among Civilizations

Rene Wadlow

The United Nations General Assembly has designated the Year 2001 as “the Year of Dialogue Among civilizations”. The United Nations in many ways reflects the deepest consciousness of humanity, and the designation of the Year 2001 as that of “The Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations” is, in fact, the reflection of a profound need, a reflection of the “Spirit of the Times”.

At one level, the dialogue among civilization resolution was an intellectual reaction to the widely quoted article of Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations” in the US Journal of Foreign Affairs (Vol. 72, No. 3, 1993). Huntington, Director of the Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University presented the thesis that world politics in the post Cold War period would no longer be a conflict between States divided by capitalist-socialist ideologies but would see a “Clash of Civilizations”. He cited in particular the fighting then going on between Muslims and Orthodox Christians in ex-Yugoslavia and the ex-USSR. The two wars in Chechnya, which took place after his article was written, could be cited as additional evidence for his thesis.

Huntington wrote: “Differences among civilizations are basic, involving history, language, culture, tradition, and most importantly, religion. Different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and Man, the citizen and the state, parents and children, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. These differences are the products of centuries. They will not soon disappear.”

While recognising the truth that civilizations change slowly and that the past is always embodied in the present, we must also recognise that we are at a time of major change in history. The accelerating pace of change in the political, social, technological, economic, cultural, and spiritual arenas of human affairs has created new opportunities for dialogue as the world is inexorably being transformed into a global society. One of the central tasks of today is to develop a problem-solving, future-oriented global view, which addresses the important concerns, issues, and problems of humanity as a whole. We need to identify as clear a vision as possible of a feasible and desirable world society and to outline the specific steps required to move in that direction. We need to analyse clearly the challenges and the responsibilities related to the transition to a global society.

The year 2001 should provide real opportunities for dialogue among civilizations. It is true that to an unprecedented degree people are meeting together in congresses, conferences, schools, and universities all over the globe. However, in itself such meetings are not dialogues. There is need to reach to a deeper level. Reaching such deeper levels takes patience, tolerance and an ability to take a longer-range view.

The Year 2001 as the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations provides a common framework in which we may analyse the past and set out visions for the future. It is an opportunity, which must

be seized. Yet United-Nations-designated “Years” accomplish little if there is no significant action on the part of non-governmental organizations, academic bodies, and cultural societies to carry them forward. Often a “Year” is half over before people know that it has even started.

We must begin where we are. As Amiya Chakravarty, a literary secretary to Rabindranath Tagore has written: “Each individual must strike the ‘universal concrete’ in terms of his own creative effort, in the milieu of his own cultural heritage; only by proceeding from wherever we are, geographically, spiritually or vocationally, can we make the integral effort for peace. The peace-worker belongs to the entire human family, using the language or religious associations to which he has been born, and which he transforms not necessarily by revolt but by inner transcendence”(1).

There has been in the recent past studies with civilization as the center of analysis: notably Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*, Arnold Toynbee’s, *A Study of History*, and Pitirim Sorokin’s *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (2). Some scholars conceive of civilizations as societies; others view them as cultures. Some consider civilizations as poly-cultures while others portray them monoculturally. Some define civilization by criteria of interaction where others see them bound by similarities.

However, there has been less work on contacts and dialogue among civilizations. Toynbee’s work deals largely with the growth of a particular civilization by challenges and responses followed by its decline and disintegration. Toynbee tends to look at the contacts of the past as a central civilization and the “barbarians at the gates”, while the situation today is that of a multifaceted dialogue among equal civilizations. Sorokin’s work also stressed the shifts in values and attitudes within a civilization over time.

Thus, there are possibilities for breaking new ground intellectually during 2001. We are called upon to look at the possibilities of multi-religious or inter-faith discussions; a civilization goes well beyond the religious dimensions. The methods for such a multi-civilizational dialogue need to be worked out. The “clash of civilizations” is relatively easy to envisage. More effort will be needed to have meaningful dialogue, but such dialogue will respond to the crucial needs of our time.

Endnotes

1. Amiya Chakravorty “World Faith for World Peace” in A. William Loos, *Religious Faith and World Culture* (New York: The Church Peace Union, 1951, 294 pp).
2. See David Wilkinson “Sorokin versus Toynbee on Civilization” in Joseph B. Ford, *Sorokin and Civilization* (New Brunswick, Nj: Transaction Publishers, 1996, 258 pp).

Rene Wadlow is Editor, Transnational Perspectives (Geneva) and Contributing Editor, Journal of Peace Studies (New Delhi).