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**Islam, Dialogue and Civil Society**

**Seyed Mohammad Khatami.**

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The book under review is a collection of articles and compilation of speeches delivered by a great Iranian scholar and eminent philosopher, Seyed Mohammad Khatami in Europe and other parts of the world in the interest of entire human kind. In this volume, it is noted that the Iranian President, Seyed Khatami outlines his vision of an Islamic culture, civilization and civil society. He has also explained as how the values of such society are different from those of Western civilization and society. But at the same time he acknowledged the achievements of the western civilisations in several areas. He therefore advocated a fruitful dialogue between the two great civilizations i.e., East and West civilizations unlike Samuel Huntington who talked of clash of the two civilizations.

This volume is organised into eleven chapters under different headings. In the first chapter, he emphasised on dialogues amongst civilizations for the benefit of mankind. This is possible when equality between people and nations are to be brought about. In other words, it can be rightly said that one holds a dialogue only when one respects the other party and considers the other party as equal to oneself. The other important point he highlights is reason, which is God's great blessing. He rightly points out that religion and reason are not opposed to each other as were understood by many western philosophers. Rather religion is a cradle and support for the growth of reason and freedom. He further said that our identity is rooted in the past, but in order to move ahead to the future we must understand the World civilization and benefit from all positive achievements of human thought and civilization, wherever they are.

In the second chapter, he discussed the necessity of the dialogue between East and West. He is of the opinion that Islam and Europe must get to know one another better and then move on to improve their economic, political and cultural relations for their mutual benefit. He further argued that dialogue is a positive thing because it is mainly based on freedom and equality. Hence, this is very much possible that no idea can be imposed on any other side and this process of dialogue can be the initial step to bring peace, stability and justice in the world. To materialise the process of dialogue, president Khatami advocates that Iran can be the meeting point of Eastern and Western cultures, just as man is the meeting point of the soul's is East and the reason's West. He also contended that Muslims and Europeans have to take benefit from each

other because both of them are next-door neighbours and nations cannot choose their neighbours like individuals who have no options but to accept their neighbours as they are.

In the third chapter, he talked of Islamic World and new challenges before them whom they have to overcome. He wondered that Islamic Ummah, once a torchbearer of knowledge, thought and civilization is now weak and backward. This is primarily due to failure in properly utilising the fruits of dominant civilization of the time. He further argued that our centuries old passivity is the result of the decline of a once shining human civilization which the World dominant civilization is truly indebted to. This is thus clear that civilizations only continue to live as long as they possess the capacity to respond to the ever-renewing questions and ever changing needs of man, other wise they are doomed to demise. Thus civilization like human being is subject to birth, development and demise.

He further rightly pointed out that our needs are in many ways different from those of earlier times. Owing to passivity we have ceased to ask many questions to ourselves. This very absence of question leads to absence of thought and ideas. What is important to note that such passivity and backwardness is not our preordained destiny? We still enjoy the potential to create another glorious civilization by the realisation of our glorious past and proper and deep understanding and to discern the difference between Islamic civilization and our life today as asserted by Khatami. He also said that it is equally important to understand the negative consequences of Western civilization on Eastern culture which are many. He further said that our era is an era of the predominance of Western culture and civilization which must be understood properly.

He further stressed upon the recognition of our past which is equally imperative, not to return and stay in the past but for the sake of understanding of the essence of our own identity. He also rightly pointed out that unless we understand it properly we cannot understand the importance of helping each other as brothers. For this, to become reality, all of us must put our minds to the realisation of an Islamic civil society in our respective countries. This society, primarily based on Islamic principles of social justice and equality, will be quite different from the civil society that is rooted in Greek philosophical thinking and Roman political tradition. Islamic society seeks neither to dominate others nor to submit to domination unlike Western society. It recognises the right of other nations to self-determination and access to the necessary means for honourable living. The Holy Quran considers itself entitled to acquire all requisite means for material and technical progress and authority.

In fifth chapter, Khatami has explained the religion with reason in the light of the Holy Book “Quran”. He said that reason is the common bond of all humans, a means of connecting to the world and to others. He has tried to make understand the people of Muslim world the reason and faith as contradictory and opposed to one another, because if reason achieves more instrumental impact in this world, faith will be sidelined. It is important to note that the faith he talked about exists alongside and parallel to reason not in opposition to it.

In the Sixth chapter “Religious Belief in Today’s world” he has discussed about God or how to reach God? For solving the social, political and Economical problems of the world through understanding time, space and context, he is of the opinion that the only secure way of understanding God is through the heart not the mind, through direct experiential contact, not the

intellect. The religious experience flows from the depths of the soul. Many philosophers and Mystic' have tried to pinpoint the intellectual undermining of the religious experience, but the path remains experiential, not intellectual.

Khatami has conveyed the world that spirituality by reason, listening talking, understanding and the language which play an important role to understand everything. It is an important agent of contact between humans but languages is an outward manifestation, a reflection of psychological reality that exists in human mind.

As he rightly pointed that one can understand through the intellect that the link between intellect and enlightenment is human understanding and this understanding is often beyond the control of human comprehension.

He has given more emphasis in understanding the past so as to take action in the present for shaping the future in the right direction. He very categorically said that our attachment to the past should not mean negating all the achievements of modern and western civilization. He also does not mean to return to the past to stay there but to understand and regain our identity that has got weakened due to the onslaught of western culture.

Thus, we conclude by saying that Khatami in this volume has talked of a civil society, which would be equally important and relevant to Muslim countries. This society would be based on equality and justice. For acquiring honour and dignity and to claim our due share in the world, Muslims should rely on two very important factors- one is wisdom and reason, and other is social cohesion and solidarity which are very much emphasised in the holy Quran. This volume will be, as a matter of fact, helpful in understanding the vision and philosophy of Khatami in particular and may also be instrumental to bring solidarity and brotherhood amongst Muslim countries in general.