Dialogue of Civilizations: A New Peace Agenda for a New Millennium

Majid Tehranian and David W. Chappell, eds.
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This book arose from a series of conferences held as part of the Toda Institute's research project, Human Security and Global Governance, ini-

tiated in 1996. The book's ambitious title matches its expansive structure. Aside from 16 chapters divided equally into Parts One and Two, there is a preface by Hans Kung, an introduction by the editors, and a lead chapter by Tehranian. In addition, the appendix cites a 15-item declaration by the peace scholars attending the Okinawa conference in 2000 to promote mutual respect and understanding among all religious and secular traditions of civility.

Tehranian and Chappell's "Introduction" situates the need for dialogue among civilizations in light of 9/11, which, they argue, presents both challenges to human security and a critical opportunity for the emergence of a new, just world order. The editors read 9/11 not as a lone act of insanity, but as an act that represents global resentment against how the world is run. They argue that unlike poverty in traditional systems that provide a social safety net, modern poverty in the "global fishbowl" is experienced as more humiliating and infuriating, because communication technologies make possible increased awareness of relative deprivation.

In chapter 1, "Informatic Civilization: Promises, Perils, Prospects," Tehranian extends the introduction's claims that in the wake of the New World Disorder, we now have the opportunity to forge a global civilization fostered by dialogue, which itself is made possible by new technologies. This section raises my hackles, for Tehranian's use of "civilization" vacillates between the singular and the plural. That is, should we think of "civilization" as a uniform, linear progression of human society based, as Tehranian argues, upon a mode of production, or should we think of "civilizations" in terms of different cosmologies derived, for instance, from the world religions?

Tehranian wants it both ways and, in classical historical materialist fashion, maps the cosmological differences onto modes of production. This raises some difficulties. For instance, despite claims of diversity in unity, the idea of a global civilization can easily be elided into a quest for uniformity and assimilation. Moreover, it raises the problem of technological determinism, which is a prevalent theme in many of this book's essays.

In Part One, "Science, Religion and Civilization," Joseph Rotblatt's essay "Science and Civilization" (chapter 2) continues the materialist thesis by arguing that material values are the basis of a singular human civilization. Although aware of the dangers of science, he maintains that scientific progress will help eliminate the reasons for war by making the basic necessities of life available to a greater proportion of humanity. Rotblatt places his faith not only in biotechnology, but also in information technology, which,

he argues, raise awareness and communication between human societies. One is astounded at the lack of social analysis in such a technological determinist argument, which prevails in many of Part One's chapters, for, as discussed above, communication also increases people's perception of relative deprivation, which potentially increases the likelihood of conflict. The remaining chapters (3-9) each deal with "religion and civilization," with chapters 4-9 each looking at the relationship between the world's major religions and civilization.

Perhaps the best essay in the book is Fred Dallmayr's "Christianity and Civilization" (chapter 8), which offers a thoughtful meditation on the notions of dialogue and civilization. Dallmayr traces the meaning of civilization in a western-Christian context and argues that the concept has been marked by conflict and tension. For instance, the view of civilization as pertaining to city life and citizenship in Antiquity presents tensions with the Augustinian separation of the Earthly and Heavenly cities. This tension is revisited in the Hobbes-Rousseau debate on human nature and the problem of order. According to Dallmayr, these conflicts and tensions mark a distinctive approach in western civilization and set it apart from other civilizations marked by complementarity and harmony.

Nowhere in Part One does one get the impression that rejuvenating an ethic of dialogue or of religious pluralism can occur from within religious communities and traditions. On the contrary, many contributions suggest that if rejuvenation were to occur, it would be the result of such external factors as the spread of secularism or of information technologies.

Part Two, "Peace and Policy Agendas," deals largely with on-the-ground strategies for bringing about change. Ironically, it is to the credit of many of the contributions in this section that they suggest moral reform from within. For example, Alexander Nikitin's essay, "Analyzing the Causes of War and Peace," suggests that understanding the rational explanations for war will not, in itself, eliminate war. Rather, he argues that aside from eliminating the usual factors for war (e.g., economic disparity), the cultivation of moral and ethical attitudes in international relations must be made a priority The rest of the chapters in this part (11-17) deal with various specific arguments that the authors believe are necessary for true global peace, such as Noguchi's (chapter 12) focus on local ownership of the development process, Radhakrishnan's (chapter 14) emphasis on a non-exploitive economic system based on Ghandi's theory of non-violence, and Haunani-Kay Trask's stress on indigenous rights (chapter 13).

I commend the editors for bringing together such diverse voices to the dialogue and for engaging in the "politics of discourse" to rescue the concept of civilization from its abuse at the hands of Huntington et al. One does not have to fall prey to either the view of inevitable clashes nor to the anti-essentialist trap of seeing everything in its local and plural forms. But neither should we reduce the concept of civilization to the singular, based on a mode of production, nor to one based on a technological determinism that denies the important differences between cosmologies. What we need is an analysis that takes seriously all theoretical elaborations on dialogue, civilizations, modernity, and traditional cosmologies.

Ali Hassan Zaidi, Doctoral Candidate
Department of Sociology
York University, Toronto, ON, Canada