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The Role of Religion in the Dialogue of Civilizations

Heads of state and religious leaders, military officers and peace activists, law experts and social workers, theologians and political scientists – everyone is calling for a “dialogue of civilizations”. It is lauded across all political and social levels and platforms as a magic formula, as a panacea against all types of conflict, as an effective answer to religiously motivated terrorism – and as an active “contribution to security policy”¹ and a necessary complement to military measures. It is the answer to Samuel Huntington’s thesis of a “clash of civilizations”. But while Huntington’s “dark prognoses” have since been “weighed in the scientific balance and found wanting”,² the dialogue – from “intercultural childcare” right up to the United Nations “Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations”³ – has been considered more than ever to be an important, perhaps even a central means of tackling cultural and religious conflicts. However, both in calls for and in the practice of this dialogue there tends to be a shortage of reflection. What is “dialogue”? Who conducts it and how? What is civilization? How is one defined and by whom? Who is able to legitimately represent a civilization in a dialogue?⁴ Above all – what is such a dialogue intended to achieve? What are the reasons, intentions, and goals? How can the relationship between religion and civilization be described? And not least: What is the concrete impact of dialogue events?

Not all these questions and concepts can and should be discussed in depth here. The focus lies far more on what *religious actors* – believers, clergy, official representatives, as well as groups and initiatives – can contribute to the “Dialogue of Civilizations” in the form in which it is currently being called for and carried out. It would be natural for religions to be drawn into this dialogue, as they not only embody cultural values and traditions and may therefore be key factors in cultural identity, but they may also (as a result of the former) play a significant role in the justification and legitimation

1 Naika Foroutan, Das Zeitalter der Zivilisationskonflikte [The Age of Civilizational Conflicts], in: Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (ed.), *Kulturaustausch online – Zeitschrift für internationale Perspektiven* 1/2006, at: <http://cms.ifa.de/publikationen/zeitschrift-fuer-kulturaustausch/archiv/kulturaustausch-2006/fernbeziehungen/foroutan> [this and all subsequent translations from non-English sources by the author].

2 Andreas Hasenclever, Geteilte Werte – Gemeinsamer Frieden? Überlegungen zur zivilisierenden Kraft von Religionen und Glaubensgemeinschaften [Divided Values – Common Peace? Thoughts on the Civilizing Power of Religions and Faith Communities], in: Hans Küng/Dieter Senghaas (eds), *Friedenspolitik* [Peace Policy], Munich 2003, pp. 288-318, here p. 289.

3 The United Nations considers itself as an “instrument for the dialogue among civilizations”, see: http://www.unric.org/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=4011 (in German).

4 Cf. Armin Nassehi, Dialog der Kulturen – Wer spricht? [Who Speaks in the Dialogue of Civilizations?], in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 28-29/2006, pp. 33-38.

of violence as a means of prosecuting a conflict. However, the proponents of dialogue are right to conclude that this role can by no means only contribute to escalation, but also to the de-escalation of conflicts, even though both research and publishing tend to concentrate on the potential for escalation.

Of course, the very concept of a dialogue of civilizations or religions immediately raises criticisms: How can a dialogue deal with religious “truths”, values, and “ultimate questions” – the very factors that distinguish and divide religions. Should the attempt even be made, or would it be more productive to concentrate on that which is shared – on transreligious ethical principles? Does open dialogue between religions really contribute to understanding or is it destined to fail? Does it even carry a risk of further intensifying conflict? Is perhaps the “only solution [...] to shift the ground of the debate from religion”,⁵ as Pratap Bhanu Mehta, president of New Delhi’s Centre for Policy Research, argues? It is also necessary to ask what external political influences affect an interreligious dialogue, in view of, for instance, the influence of the Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs on the sending of imams to Germany. In states with a high proportion of immigrants from other cultural areas, the dialogue between civilizations is problematized by the fact that the immigrants or their descendents often adapt to some degree to the new culture and no longer see themselves as belonging (exclusively and unambiguously) to their civilization of origin. And finally, an interreligious dialogue based on tolerance and mutual respect also requires these by no means straightforward issues to be dealt with at the *intra*-religious level.

All of these problems are worthy of thorough consideration; sometimes, however, this third step is taken before the second is considered. Dialogue between religions does take place and will continue to take place simply because many believers feel themselves obliged for religious reasons to seek understanding and co-operation with members of other faiths. Nonetheless, before analysing and evaluating existing dialogue events, critics often raise fundamental objections about their meaningfulness and usefulness. This is done in place of asking under what conditions and by what means religions have so far contributed to successful dialogue – i.e. dialogue that managed to reduce tension, conflict and violence – or are capable of doing so in the future.

In the following, therefore, the focus shall be on *practical aspects* of religious contributions to a dialogue of civilizations. In it, I shall distinguish between three central functions that religions can play in civilizational conflicts:

1. Religions as “bridges” between civilizations.
2. Religions as actors pursuing intercultural understanding and *détente*.
3. Religions as actors pursuing concrete conflict management tasks.

5 Pratap Bhanu Mehta, *Globalization and God. A Culture of Religious Exchange*, at: http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-478/_nr-536/i.html.

While these functions certainly overlap and influence each other, in the current context, the artificial distinction may be of use.

Religion as a "Bridge" Between Civilizations

When conflict parties belong to the same religion, this amounts to a vital connection between them – across confessional, cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic divisions. A bridging function is available here because the opponents can fall back upon shared religious values and traditions, which tend to deeply inform the relevant civilizations and (individual and collective) identities. In such contexts, religions are called upon to ensure that these values are perceived in the public consciousness as *common* principles with universal applicability and to demand that they be upheld by all parties to the conflict.

When the opponents belong to different religions, it is first necessary to identify common religiously based values and then to install these in the public consciousness. All religions possess a potential for conflict; their scriptures and traditions can be interpreted as supportive of violence, their histories contain gruesome examples of religiously legitimized violent excess. Yet equally, every religion also has a potential for peace; their scriptures and traditions can also be interpreted as opposing violence, and their histories contain impressive examples of religiously based renunciation of violence and the promotion of peace. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and the current Dalai Lama can stand for the many less well-known "silent" actors. These peace-oriented interpretations and traditions are, in their turn, based upon key ethical values such as non-violence, humanity and human dignity, tolerance, and respect. Such fundamental principles link the most disparate religions despite all their many dogmatic contradictions and irreconcilabilities. These common ethical standards can be built upon. They are a bridge between religions, civilizations, and conflict parties. Of course, this commonality cannot remove the causes of conflict and do not eliminate the need for the hard work of finding solutions, but, in the form of non-violent conflict management, it can assist such efforts, sometimes providing decisive support. The "Declaration Toward a Global Ethic" made by the second Parliament of the World's Religions (7,000 representatives of 250 faith groups) in Chicago in 1993 is an example of an agreement on ethical standards of this kind. The declaration concerns "not the truth of world views, not that which religions believe, but rather common standards of behaviour as a basis for the dialogue of civilizations and as an alternative strategy to fanaticism and war 'in the name of God'. It concerns a minimal ethical consensus that gives our world cohesiveness at the deepest level. It concerns values and norms that are essentially identical for all civilizations and societies, all re-

ligions and nations.”⁶ Whether one calls this a global ethic (Hans Küng), consensus (Jürgen Habermas), or international morality (Roman Herzog),⁷ the fact that representatives of religions subscribe to these values while stressing their *religious* basis is an important intermediary step. And although there are no means of using sanctions to enforce the agreed standards of behaviour within a religion, representatives of all religions who are open to dialogue can make use of this document and build on it.

The image of a “bridge” is a symbol, and inter-religious dialogue is itself often symbolic, at least at the level of religious “leadership”. In the public sphere, “dialogue” largely appears to take the form of discussions between senior officials and high-ranking dignitaries from various religions. Such discussions mostly take place at conferences or staged platform events. Little detail of the content of these discussions is shared with the public; it is considered enough of a success that representatives of different religions come together more or less harmoniously, and the fact that they are able to speak with each other in a civilized fashion turns this into a “dialogue”. Admittedly, such events often have little more than a signalling and a symbolic effect, yet this should not be underestimated. The evidence of a readiness to enter into discussions (one’s own and that of the members of another religion), the encouragement of similar meetings at other levels of organized religion, and the publicly staged demonstration of tolerance and respect for other religions are indispensable. This can be crucial, for instance in preventing political conflicts from becoming religiously charged and instrumentalized. Conversely, it is also necessary to ask what message would be transmitted if religious leaders were not willing or able to meet each other in a spirit of respect and peace. The absence of dialogue would – intentionally or not – stress the differences and the rejection of those of other beliefs, thereby contributing to conflict escalation. To that extent, there is no alternative to such religious “summits”, irrespective of any tangible achievements. They should rather take place more frequently, until interreligious meetings are considered a matter of course.

If, however, we consider religious leaders to have a certain political and hermeneutical authority within their own communities, the effect of such summits could clearly be stronger and more concrete. Agreeing on binding ethical standards across religious boundaries is important. However, what is also required are measures to publicize and enforce these standards as binding within each religion. In order to ensure that more than the already “well disposed” and moderate are reached, it is important that the results of the dialogue are reflected in the mass media, in sermons and religious instruc-

6 Martin Bauschke, *Dialog oder Kampf der Kulturen? Die Rolle der Religionen in der Welt-politik* [Dialogue or Clash of Civilizations? The Role of Religions in World Politics], at: <http://www.uni-muenster.de/Politikwissenschaft/Doppeldiplom/woyke/Religion.pdf>, p. 13. Cf. also Parliament of the World’s Religions, *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic*, Chicago 4 September 1993, at: <http://www.cpwr.org/resource/ethic.pdf>.

7 Cf. Foroutan, cited above (Note 1).

tion, in the education of children and clergy, in schoolbooks, textbooks, prayer books, and hymn books, in the curricula followed by trainee teachers, soldiers, and journalists, and, finally, in political circles. Religious leaders are presented with far-reaching opportunities. The fact that they often do not take these up suggests, on the one hand, a degree of unwillingness on their part, but it may also be a sign of a lack of reflection on what such dialogue events are intended to achieve and how this is to be realized in practice.

Religions as Actors Pursuing Intercultural Understanding and Détente

The signals sent out by a dialogue between senior representatives of religions are directed at the public and politicians, on the one hand, and at members of the religions of the various participants, on the other. Clergy and “ordinary” believers need to take advantage of the momentum and develop it in their communities. Grassroots-level dialogue can focus less on the development of a universal ethos; that would in all likelihood be too demanding for the participants and is almost guaranteed to lead to conflict with the leadership. Of course, theological and other disputes should be discussed by ordinary believers, but (collective) action is likely to have a more powerful and durable effect. Participating in an exchange of views generally requires a capability for intellectual reflection and a certain level of pre-existing knowledge, which is why it is preferable that such discussions be carried out by people with an education in religious and rhetorical matters, especially since the number of participants is usually limited. Such exchanges will not affect either the easily swayed “religiously illiterate” (R. Scott Appleby)⁸ or the violence-prone extremists on either side. Uncertainty or mistrust, religious prejudices or theological reservations, negative experiences, or simply a lack of interest hinder them from taking part in such “verbal dialogues”. Practical engagement, on the other hand, is open to everybody. And at the local level, resources and opportunities for co-operation are available that may well be lacking at the leadership level or would provoke infra- or inter-religious controversy if exercised at that level. Examples include inter-faith prayer meetings, the joint celebration of festivals, or “even” joint Protestant-Catholic communion services. This kind of “active dialogue” largely concerns the development of personal familiarity, the correction of cultural or religious stereotypes and clichés, and the reduction of mistrust and fear – factors that can play a major role in the (violent) escalation of conflicts. Collective activities can not only reach far more people, they allow the establishment of contacts on a day-to-day level – beyond religious and cultural differences, beyond dogmatic contradictions, beyond current or historical conflicts with a religious component,

8 Appleby defines “religious illiteracy” as “the low level or virtual absence of second-order moral reflection and basic theological knowledge.” R. Scott Appleby, *Ambivalence of the Sacred. Religion, Violence and Reconciliation*, Lanham (Mass.) 2000, p. 69.

and, moreover, beyond obvious moral or pedagogical intentions and expectations.

There remains much vain competition and senseless squandering of resources. But why should there be no multifaith children's, youth and women's groups? Why no joint daytrips? Why does every religion and denomination in each community require its own newsletter? Joint publications would inform members of *all* religions of forthcoming festivals and events (and provide background information), and would encourage mutual knowledge and enable understanding. Joint statements formulated by local religious communities on political or religious topics would manage to avoid the anonymity and abstractness of similar declarations carried made at higher levels. Why are there no Christian-Muslim "community partnerships" (whether within a single city or across state boundaries) designed to enable mutual visits and support, similar to the work performed by the reformed churches in East and West Germany? A Catholic congregation in Cologne recently donated the money collected at its own anniversary celebrations for the building of a neighbouring mosque.⁹ The recipients know that it is the people in their neighbourhood who are supporting them – the people they meet in the shops or on the streets, perhaps previously with mistrust and insecurity on both sides. Measures of this kind are ideally suited for changing – i.e. relaxing – relations between people in a lasting way. Differences do not disappear as a result, but they no longer separate people into potentially conflicting groups. People of other faiths are seen as "normal", perhaps even as friendly, as is often the case at work or in sport clubs. Just this is already a contribution to understanding and a form of intercultural dialogue and *rapprochement*. It is the basis that can lead to common activities, and it is such activities that can motivate religious leaders. A good example is a development aid and reconciliation project supported by the Association of Churches and Missions in South Western Germany (*Evangelisches Missionswerk in Südwestdeutschland, EMS*): In a disputed area of Indonesia that is afflicted by civil conflict, the local reformed church set up and advised fishery co-operatives in which Christians and Muslims co-operate on both the catching and the selling of fish in order to earn a living. Erstwhile enemies now literally sit in the same boat and pull together; they are dependent on one another and profit from each other. This experience and the (trusting) human relations established as a result have also survived through new periods of trouble.¹⁰

At the level of the religious grass roots and the ordinary clergy, inter-religious *activity* is a more effective way to contribute to a dialogue of civilizations. It is also natural to stress activity in the local context, given the concrete problems and issues that need to be resolved and the opportunities

9 Cf. Monika Maier-Albang, Eine Investition in den Frieden [An Investment in Peace], in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 4 April 2007, p. 9.

10 Cf. Christine Grötzinger, Fischen versöhnt Muslime und Christen [Fishing Reconciles Muslims and Christians], in: *Evangelisches Missionswerk in Südwestdeutschland* (ed.), *Aufruf zum Dialog* [Call to Dialogue], Stuttgart 2007.

available to do so. Nevertheless, this by no means excludes dialogue in the form of discussions and conferences. Indeed, verbal and active dialogues should ideally be combined and links established between the leadership and grassroots levels. Leadership-level meetings and measures within each faith community should encourage and support joint activities at a local level but should certainly not replace them. If discussion does not result in some kind of action supportive to the peaceful coexistence of religions, peoples, and individuals, it loses its effectiveness and very *raison d'être*.

Religions as Actors Pursuing Concrete Conflict Management Tasks

Besides symbolic “summit meetings” and local initiatives, religions also possess the potential and authority to have a de-escalating effect on openly violent national and international conflicts. The media and academia’s overwhelming concern with the potential of religion for violence still very much overshadows an awareness of this specifically religious potential for *peace*. However, religious actors have demonstrated again and again that they have a particular ability to intervene in religiously and culturally charged conflicts on the side of mediation and conciliation. That is equally true with regard to conflicts in which a remote and superficial view of the parties sees them as belonging to the same cultural group (e.g. in Africa). However, if one employs a more sophisticated concept of culture, or sees things with the eyes of the conflict parties themselves, cultural elements also play a key role in conflicts that are primarily ethnic, socio-economic, and political. According to this expanded understanding, a “dialogue of civilizations” has been or still is of value in conflicts between Germans and French, between Serbs and Kosovars or Bosniaks, between indigenous Maya and the Mestizo-dominated political elite in El Salvador, between (mostly Arab-Muslim) North and (mostly African-Christian) South Sudanese, between Tamils and Singhalese in Sri Lanka, between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda, and between Christians and Muslims in Sierra Leone, Uganda, and Liberia.

In all the named conflicts, religious actors made an extremely important contribution to de-escalation and the avoidance of violence: Franco-German understanding following the Second World War was decisively encouraged and supported by the American evangelist Frank Buchman and his Moral Re-Armament movement; the Community of Sant’Egidio, a Catholic lay movement, was active in Kosovo; in many countries in Latin America, individual Catholic bishops, such as Oscar Romero, as well as external organizations like the Lutheran World Federation contributed to the settlement of the region’s civil wars; in Sudan, the World Council of Churches mediated an eleven-year peace in 1972, and the activities of Christian churches continue to be successful above all in conflict settlement in Southern Sudan; in Sri Lanka, the Buddhist *Sarvodaya Shramadana* movement performs a wide

range of emergency assistance and reconciliation work; Rwanda's Muslims opposed the 1994 genocide and offered protection and emergency assistance to persecuted Tutsis and moderate Hutus; the urgings and engagement of interreligious councils in Sierra Leone, Uganda, and Liberia were decisive in bringing an end to the violence and remain vital to keeping the peace.

Religious actors have also proved their peacemaking and de-escalation potential in other conflicts, whether wars, civil wars, or resistance struggles waged against oppressive regimes. Examples include the Biafran War in Nigeria at the end of the 1960s (Quakers), Lebanon (1982), and Mozambique (1989-92, *Sant'Egidio*), Madagascar (1991-92), and the Philippines (1984-86, elements within the Catholic Church), the non-violent independence struggle of the Islamic Pashtuns against the British colonial rulers (1930-47, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan), the Argentinean-Chilean Beagle Conflict (1978-84, Pope John-Paul II), Cambodia (since 1979, *Maha Ghosananda*), not to mention the "*Wende*" in the GDR (1989-90, protestant church).¹¹

The examples show clearly that religious peacemakers can be found in all faiths and cultural areas. And the peacemaking potential of religion is not limited to high-ranking representatives or charismatic leaders, although, because they are able to command the attention of politics and society, they are the bearers of great responsibility. Nor is the success of religiously based interventions restricted to particular kinds of conflict or particular modes of intervention. War or resistance struggle, local or international, preventive or at the height of hostilities, peace negotiations or reconciliation activities: The success of religiously based constructive conflict management can never be ruled out *a priori*. Naturally, that does not mean that religious actors can intervene successfully in *all* conflicts, but it illustrates their potential – the fact that opportunities are sometimes presented to them that are not available to secular political actors. The key element here is the extra trust that religious actors are often afforded in contrast to their secular counterparts. Explicitly religious peace activists are more likely to be considered independent and fair, and therefore to act as disinterested "honest brokers". This reputation is generally independent of whether the conflict mediators share one's own faith, have the same faith as the opponent, or are adherents of a third religion: An explicit and convincing appeal to religious texts and traditions is often seen as trustworthy *per se*, although it must of course be backed up with disinterested and credible behaviour.

The peacemaking potential of religions is especially (but not only) great in relation to conflicts and settlement processes that themselves have a religious or cultural character. Yet not only political actors, but also the religious communities themselves have generally failed to realize their own concrete,

11 Further details and examples can be found in Markus A. Weingardt, *Religion Macht Frieden. Zum Friedenspotential von Religionen in politischen Gewaltkonflikten* [Religion Powers Peace. On the Peacemaking Potential of Religions in Violent Political Conflicts], Stuttgart 2007.

politically relevant potential – both locally and internationally. It is therefore incumbent upon the religions to discover their capabilities, expand them, and offer them more actively in conflict situations. At present, too much is left to chance and individual initiative. Representatives of conflict parties, governments, political organizations (e.g. the UN, the EU, and the OSCE), and secular peace initiatives would do well to make more use of religions' significant potential to work for peace and to encourage them to take seriously the responsibilities they ascribe themselves. Last but not least, the mass media should also report on the many-sided activities undertaken by religious actors to promote *peace*. This would be a major contribution to dismantling religious and cultural prejudice and suspicion.

The "Dialogue of Civilizations" between OSCE States

The desires of the signatories of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act focused on "overcoming distrust and increasing confidence"¹² between the participating States. Among the means by which this was to be achieved was "cultural exchange", though admittedly there was still no direct mention of a "dialogue of civilizations", and, when civilizations were mentioned, the stress was on language and the arts. However, no mention at all was made of religion in this context; in fact, religion is only mentioned five times in the Final Act (and only once in the 1990 Charter of Paris), and exclusively in the context of the right to freedom of religion. Religions were clearly not taken particularly seriously as significant social actors with a relevance that also touches upon the political sphere.

More than thirty years after Helsinki, and although the OSCE has undergone fundamental transformations, it covers essentially the same cultural area as always, if we recall that today's independent states with a largely Muslim population were always part of the CSCE as republics of the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, these states receive little public attention and are seldom considered in the context of cultural exchange or the dialogue of civilizations. Instead, all eyes are on Turkey – a country with a largely Muslim population between the Orient and the Occident, and a potential EU member. In the long term, however, OSCE participating States with a Muslim majority such as Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan could also perform a crucial bridging function between the OSCE world and the Middle East. It would therefore be advisable to create stable cultural as well as political and economic links between these states, on the one hand, and Europe and the OSCE, on the other. The leaders of the various religions can contribute to this by means of meet-

12 Final Act of Helsinki, Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, Helsinki, 1 August 1975, in: Arie Bloed (ed.), *The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. Analysis and Basic Documents, 1972-1993*, Dordrecht 1993, pp. 141-217, here: p. 142.

ings, exchanges, and co-operation. Similar “confidence-building measures” between local groups and the level of individuals will remain difficult for the foreseeable future. However, official relations need to be established and cultivated before potential interreligious tensions or the influence of fundamentalist groups make contacts difficult or even impossible. In Kazakhstan, whose population is roughly equally split between Christianity and (relatively liberal) Islam, it would be particularly advisable to establish a national interreligious council. Such an organ would also set an example for other states in the region, just as the Interfaith Mediation Committee in Liberia (1990, later the Interreligious Council) inspired the creation of other interreligious councils in West Africa.

Summary

In the absence of social or political conflict, a dialogue of religions would amount to merely a discussion of theological issues. And while that is no small thing in itself, it is not the cause and aim of the current world-wide demand for dialogue. Dialogue, in the sense in which it is being used here, is intended far more as a contribution to the management of existing or incipient conflicts and efforts to prevent them from becoming violent. Here, the religions – as key social forces, as bearers and mediators of values, as potential bridges between civilizations and states, as trustworthy agents of peace – are considered to possess definite capabilities. In order to analyse the role of religion in the dialogue of civilizations and to make recommendations regarding its form and content, it is necessary to identify both the participants in the religious dialogue and the goals of the dialogue or hoped-for dialogue.

Religions are represented by a) their leading members (generally holders of high spiritual offices and other dignitaries, such as bishops, patriarchs, and grand ayatollahs, sometimes including learned members of universities and other centres of spiritual learning); b) the ordinary clergy (priests, imams, rabbis, monks, etc.); and c) the mass of believers (ordinary adherents with no leadership role). The way a (potentially violent) conflict manifests on each of these levels is different, and the requirements of a dialogue vary accordingly, as do the opportunities that exist and the means available to frame such a dialogue.

The goals of dialogue must be set in such a way as to take into account the causes of a conflict and the issues at stake, the conditions that this imposes on any dialogue, and the formal opportunities available for framing any dialogue. The participants from various cultural and/or religious groups need to clarify whether their collective efforts are intended to increase their knowledge and understanding of each other’s culture and religion (on a personal level) or to arrive at an agreement on binding ethical standards; whether the dialogue is to deal with specific conflicts in detail or to publicly counteract

the religiously charged nature of the conflict; whether the intention is to develop general statements or to make specific political, legal, military, economic, or socio-political demands; and whether it is intended to address the various communities of believers, the political elites of the conflict parties, society as a whole, or an international public.

Conclusion

The dialogue of civilizations is no panacea. Indeed it is not any kind of a remedy as long as it remains unclear what the “sickness” is, i.e. what needs to be cured. A conflict is not necessarily a “sickness”, is not negative *per se*, but it must not be allowed to escalate into violence. Any steps that aim at constructive conflict management, of which a “dialogue of civilizations” is *one*, must be preceded by a thorough diagnosis. There are a large number of different measures that religions can take to contribute to this dialogue, to initiate it, and to encourage it – from soup kitchens to peace treaties. However, the measures must conform both to the intended goals and to the instruments and opportunities available to reach them. Verbal and active dialogue need to be combined, as do the various hierarchic levels. The trump card that religious leaders hold is the symbolic power of their activity, whether they meet for high-level talks or – perhaps more importantly – express their sense of partnership and respect by visiting other religious communities in person. This power of symbolic action, which requires no great effort to perform, has by no means been exhausted.

However, claims to exclusive truth and absoluteness threaten to damage or even wreck the dialogue of religions. Believers and religious leaders often fear a weakening of their own religious sensibilities if other faiths are accepted as potential pathways to “ultimate truths”. The insistence on the exclusivity of a *single* true way to salvation devalues other religious paths and makes dialogue considerably more difficult. Respect and tolerance with regard to other religions is, however, a fundamental prerequisite for interreligious dialogue and co-operation. And yet real respect begins when I can assert my own personal religious truths *for myself* while accepting another’s differing religious truth and conviction as authoritative and valid without restrictions *for him*.

Where dialogue is not practised as a purely theological discourse but focuses rather on human interaction and peaceful behaviour in (specific) conflict situations, there it is advisable to concentrate on the urgent problems and to address “ultimate questions” quite literally last of all.