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Migration, Media and Intercultural Dialogue

Culture, religion and civilization in selected UN documents on cultural dialogue

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This research programme focuses on a range of issues, theoretical and practical, related to cultural diversity and difference. Migration and media are twin facets of globalization, the one demographic, with crucial spatio-temporal consequences, and the other cultural and technological. While migration often poses the question of cultural difference, diverse forms of media play a key role in enabling representation, thus forging modes of communication. Through a focus on the role of media, this research programme explores the extent to which the latter bridges cultural differences in contexts of migration and facilitates intercultural dialogue. Of interest too are the ways in which media can mobilize societies and cultures. Also relevant is the role of media in triggering migration, as well as in connecting migrants to their homelands.

Culture, religion and civilization in selected UN documents on cultural dialogue

Summary

This report analyzes the various forms of interaction, conflation and distinction between the concepts of culture, tradition, civilization and religion in a selection of the principle documents produced on these topics within the UN community. Documents elaborated by UN General Assembly, UNESCO and UNAOC after 2001 are examined. The analysis shows that, although the concepts of "dialogue" and "alliance" are meant to counter contemporary representations of "Western" and "Islamic" societies as distant and incompatible wholes, the debate remains often conditioned by a static and a-historical view of cultural and religious traditions. Particularly, the frequent overlapping of terms such as 'culture', 'religion', 'identity' and 'tradition' and the use of the general notion of 'civilization' contribute to reproducing a view of culture and religion as closed entities, making the effort to overtake divisions harder.

Evidence

The clash of civilizations

The historical relevance of 'Intercultural dialogue' for the international agenda has been highlighted by Bloom (2013) and Bello (2013), who showed how, at the beginning of the 2000s, the use of the notion of 'civilization' soared as a consequence of the debate triggered by Huntington's notorious thesis, known as "The clash of civilizations" (Huntington 1993). According to Huntington:

> the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of

civilizations will dominate global politics. *The fault lines between civilizations* will be the battle lines of the future (Huntington 1996, emphasis added).

The widespread use of the notion of 'dialogue of – or among – civilizations' constituted in this sense a first reaction to, and at the same time, an attempt to address these "fault lines between civilizations" through concrete measures (Bloom 2013; Bello 2013). In point of fact, the initiative to designate 2001 as the UN Year of Dialogue among Civilizations underlines the pressing sense of an emerging conflict along these lines.

Culture and diversity

Less than a month after September 11, UNESCO issued the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (November 2 2001), an instrument aimed at recognising diversity and plurality as forms of common richness for humanity ("cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature", art.1). The declaration acknowledges the relevance, for "our increasingly diverse societies", of the "harmonious interaction among people and groups with plural, varied and dynamic cultural identities as well as their willingness to live together" (UNESCO 2001).
A specific definition of culture is provided in the introduction:

> culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and [...] it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs (*ibidem*).

Despite this definition, no specific details are given on how to consider "cultural identity". In this sense, article 5 – which states that "all persons are entitled to quality education and training that fully respect *their cultural identity*; and all persons have the right to participate in the cultural life of *their choice and conduct their own cultural practices*" (*ibidem*) – may also raise questions about the status of notions such as "identity" and "cultural practice" in a multicultural environment.

Interestingly, the concept of 'religion' does not occur in the document. Indeed, the lack of reference to this seems somehow helpful in giving "cultural diversity" a less ambiguous and more contextualised definition. The impact of social rights policies upon peaceful coexistence is instead emphasised: "policies for the inclusion and participation of all citizens are guarantees of social cohesion, the vitality of civil society and peace" (art. 2); they are "indissociable from a democratic framework" (art. 2); "no one may invoke cultural diversity to infringe upon human rights guaranteed by international law, nor to limit their scope" (art. 4).

Finally, in this same introduction the concept of 'dialogue' appears as associated either with the ideas of 'diversity', 'tolerance' and 'cooperation' – as being "among the best guarantees of international peace and security" (*ibidem*) – or, and differently, as related to the notions of 'culture' and 'civilization'. A definition of this latter term is not provided.

The Alliance of Civilizations

On September 21 2004, only four months after Madrid's terrorist attacks, the Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodrigues Zapatero addressed a speech to UN General Assembly, in which the far-reaching

initiative of an "Alliance of Civilizations" was put forward:

> In my capacity as representative of a country created and enriched by diverse cultures, before this Assembly I want to propose an Alliance of Civilizations between the Western and the Arab and Muslim worlds. Some years ago a wall collapsed. We must now prevent hatred and incomprehension from building a new wall. Spain wants to submit to the Secretary General, whose work at the head of this organisation we firmly support, the possibility of establishing a High Level Group to push forward this initiative (Zapatero 2004).

The reference to the "Alliance of Civilizations" is clearly moulded upon Huntington's formulation, whereby "Western" and "Islam" are recognisable and opposed wholes (Said 2001). The proposal of an "alliance" was adopted by the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who joined the initiative as co-sponsor in June 2005 and invited the Secretary-General Kofi Annan to announce the Alliance of Civilizations programme to the Member States. In the launching statement, the Secretary-General endorses the initiative by observing:

> Events of recent years have heightened the sense of a widening gap and lack of mutual understanding between Islamic and Western societies – an environment that has been exploited and exacerbated by extremists in all societies. The Alliance of Civilizations is intended as a coalition against such forces, as a movement to advance mutual respect for religious beliefs and traditions, and as a reaffirmation of humankind's increasing interdependence in all areas – from the environment to health, from economic and social development to peace and security (Annan 2005).

On September 2 2005, Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced the establishment of a High-level Group to guide the initiative. The group comprised of "specialists in the field of inter-civilizational and intercultural relations" (Spokesman for UN Secretary-General 2005). On that occasion, the spokesman for UN Secretary-General reported:

> Only a comprehensive coalition will be able to avert any further deterioration of relations between societies and nations, which could threaten international stability. The Alliance seeks to counter this trend by establishing a paradigm of mutual respect between civilizations and cultures (Spokesman for UN Secretary-General 2005).

In spite of their relevance for the initiative, the concepts of 'society', 'nation', 'civilization', 'culture', 'religious beliefs' and 'traditions' are used almost interchangeably. According to an assumption which has the effect of reinforcing Huntington's "fault lines between civilizations", the power of the extremists is mainly attributed to "gaps and lack of mutual understanding", whose ultimate causes remain unclear (Spokesman for UN Secretary-General 2005).

This point is clearly addressed by the High-level Group of experts during its first meeting in November 2005. According to the available Summary Notes, members warned against using "inaccurate and confusing terminology, such as 'Islamic-Western', which equates a term referring to religion with one referring to geography" (High-level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations 2005). After a general

reflection on religion and its role in promoting justice and tolerance, participants observed the relationship between terrorism and "asymmetry of power", which feeds "a sense of humiliation and resentment among many non-radicals in and outside of the Muslim world – a resentment which itself feeds radicalism" (*ibidem*). This argument, which connects on-going conflicts to global imbalances and injustices, helps to overcome the simplistic and a-historical opposition of civilizations, allowing the consideration of the actual motives of resentment in the present world:

> Double standards in the defence of human rights norms and international law is acute in several regions where Muslim populations are viewed as victims of aggression and violence perpetrated by non-Muslim populations. […] these flashpoints of humiliation and resentment include the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the conflict in Chechnya, and the occupation of Iraq. […] many […] governments in the Middle East which receive support from Western governments are authoritarian in nature, providing an additional source for resentment among large Muslim populations (High-level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations 2005).

This point is further developed in the High-level group's final report, submitted to the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan in November 2006:

> Over the past few years, wars, occupation and acts of terror have exacerbated mutual suspicion and fear within and among societies. Some political leaders and sectors of the media, as well as radical groups have exploited this environment, painting mirror images of a world made up of mutually exclusive cultures, religions, or civilizations, historically distinct and destined for confrontation (Alliance of Civilizations 2006 3).

The Group's conclusions highlight how the influential image of a clash of civilizations has averted attention from the "real nature of the predicament the world is facing":

> Classifying internally fluid and diverse societies along hard-and-fast lines of civilizations interferes with more illuminating ways of understanding questions of identity, motivation and behaviour. Rifts between the powerful and the powerless or the rich and the poor or between different political groups, classes, occupations and nationalities have greater explanatory power than such cultural categories. […] Worse, by promoting the misguided view that cultures are set on an unavoidable collision course, they help turn negotiable disputes into seemingly intractable identity-based conflicts that take hold of the popular imagination. It is essential, therefore, to counter the stereotypes and misconceptions that deepen patterns of hostility and mistrust among societies (Alliance of Civilizations 2006 3).

The High-level Group expresses strong criticism against the image of a world composed of conflicting societies, a representation which diverts attention from the historical and political nature of the conflicts. Nonetheless, conclusions do not debate the significance and implications of the same concept of 'civilization'. Although the proposal of the Alliance advocates an all-encompassing strategy of interchange and dialogue, the concept of 'civilization' risks reinforcing the notion of a world of ontologically diverse and separate histories, traditions and, ultimately, humanities.

The high-level dialogue on interreligious and intercultural cooperation

The problem of intercultural dialogue and interreligious understanding represents a major concern for the General Assembly, which in its resolution 61/221 of 20 December 2006 decided "to convene in 2007 a high-level dialogue on interreligious and intercultural cooperation for the promotion of tolerance, understanding and universal respect on matters of freedom of religion or belief and cultural diversity" (UN General Assembly 2006). The initiative was aimed at strengthening

> efforts of interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation by engaging a variety of actors and constituencies, especially in government, civil society and the United Nations system (*ibidem*).

Representatives of civil society, religious groups and academia were invited to speak in two panels on "Challenges of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Today" and "Best Practices and Strategies for Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward". Analyzing the communications is of particular interest to show the participants' endeavour to identify a framework in which both cultural plurality and common values can make sense together. Nonetheless, only a few contributions tried to address directly the causes of contemporary intercultural and interreligious conflicts. Among them it is worth noting the remark of Pakistan's Ambassador Munir Akram, who said that "misunderstanding and friction between cultures and civilizations are not the result of religious differences", but arise from divergent political perspectives, "such as the crises in the Middle East" (Akram at the UN General Assembly 2007). He stresses that national efforts should promote "conscious action to counter extremism within societies", by adopting "appropriate reforms in educational curricula, initiate dialogue among their own peoples" and "protect religious minorities".

At the global level, he called for, among other things, efforts to resolve major "international disputes", and to promote equitable economic development, as well as confidence-building measures in societies where migration had created a mix of faiths and culture (UN General Assembly 2007).

Participants mainly shared the belief that efforts to replace intolerance and discrimination with understanding and mutual acceptance should be directed at eliminating distorted notions that "deepen barriers and widen divides" (*ibidem*). Education was almost unanimously recognized as a primary tool in this sense: as General Assembly President Srgjan Kerim declared, "children are not born with prejudice, it is learned" (*ibidem*). Nonetheless, a mere few contributions acknowledged social justice as a major means of preventing the spread of extremism.

The dialogue tried to insert the pluralistic vision of the world as a mosaic of separate cultures and traditions into a framework of "common values and shared aspirations" (Ban Ki-Mon at the UN General Assembly 2007). Whereas it was able to provide a convincing narrative that blended particularism and a common humanity, it seems less effective in addressing the structural causes which underlie contemporary cultural and religious conflicts.

Conclusions and recommendations

There is a recurrent inconvenience in the use of notions that commonly define membership, identity and difference: concepts such as culture, tradition, religion and civilization are frequently

associated to images of separation, distance and self-sufficiency. This series of images obfuscates the plurality of contributions that are essential to the historical affirmation of groups and societies. Since contemporary conflicts are frequently patterned on the rhetoric of communitarianism and incompatibility, the theory of an incumbent "clash of civilizations" quickly became a common-sense interpretative tool. In order to address the "fault lines among civilizations" theorized by Huntington, the UN General Assembly has directed specific efforts at promoting "dialogue" and "alliance" among groups. Notwithstanding, as this report aims to discuss, the notion of "civilization" conveys anyhow a static and a-historical view of cultural and religious traditions. I have argued that this view, which attributes to the inherent structure of cultural differences a naturally conflictive potentiality, somehow obscures the historical foundations of contemporary conflicts. As the Alliance of Civilizations High-level Group has properly underscored, global imbalances have greater explanatory power than cultural categories, which frequently represent only a superficial layer.

The image of the world as a mosaic of different, relatively self-referential civilizations may probably be harmonized within an encompassing picture of "common values and shared aspirations". This is the goal that the UN General Assembly has assumed as a priority. However, contemporary global challenges require from policy-makers a more interconnected and interrelated vision of societies. 'Civilizations', as discussed in this report, are united by a common historical thread that influences the processes of clash and dialogue more than any intrinsic 'cultural' characteristics. Global challenges call policy-makers for a view of the world as one system. According to this view, well-being and social justice in a country have repercussions on its close and, increasingly, far 'neighbours', contributing to stability, peace and security on a global scale.

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