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Organización
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Paris Nishan Forum: Confucianism and New Humanism in a Globalized World

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Speech

by

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Excellencies,
Dear Colleagues,
Distinguished guests of this noble house,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In one of my previous lives as the State Secretary for International Affairs for Education and Culture, I was responsible to curate the Hungarian Cultural Year in China in 2007-2008. One of the most memorable moments was entering the new opera house in Shanghai and viewing two mural paintings facing each other: one depicting a Western symphonic orchestra, and another – a traditional Chinese orchestra. For me, this image represents a symbol of cross-cultural exchange of knowledge, learning from each other and respecting the cultural differences that constitute our diversity as humanity.

The key aim ahead of us, therefore, is to find a way to work together so that the result of our common endeavor will enable us and our children to appreciate and celebrate the richness and the diversity of our cultures.

There is a saying of Confucius that I often find relevant to our contemporary world: “Life is really simple, but we insist on making it complicated.” So let us be simple and straightforward in working together, inspiring each other and celebrating our diversity.

I would like to open this session with questioning, in a Socratic tradition, one of the fundamental assumptions of our gathering today – namely, that we, the humans beings, are on the irreversible trajectory of intellectual development and progress towards a higher level of consciousness, where peace becomes a natural state of mind and war – inconceivable. We at UNESCO usually take this as a given. As the background document for our today's gathering tells us, “the evolutionary philosophy of UNESCO embraces a profound optimism vis-à-vis the notions of human development and progress.”

I too, adhere to the philosophy that recognizes the innate potential of human beings to overcome their differences through dialogue, to transcend above the instinctive urges that lead to conflicts, and to bring about a lasting peace. But we have to be honest to ourselves, and admit that the state of the world today paints an ambivalent picture. For the most part of the 20th century, humanity has waged wars of unprecedented destructive power.

We would have hoped, of course, that our resolute response to these atrocities, such as the establishment of United Nation system in general, and of UNESCO in particular, to guard the precarious peace, would make the dictum of “never again” a reality. But it did not. We all witnessed, over and over again, a senseless loss of life in multitude of conflicts, fuelled by poverty, resource scarcity, and religious and ideological extremism, and supplied by international arms production and trade in ever-increasing volumes. Our vocabularies became enriched (and our humanity diminished) with the expressions such as “genocide,” “ethnic cleansing,” and “mass murder.” Sadly, we cannot talk about these phenomena only in the past tense – they have spilled well into the 21st century, and are making the news today in many parts of the world.

Today’s occasion gives us an opportunity to reflect on how to ensure a harmonious future for our posterity in the rapidly globalizing world that continues to break down inter-cultural barriers and brings the diverse social, religious and ethnic groups in close contact with each other. Pluralism, reflecting the diversity of thoughts, world-views and attitudes, is an integral characteristic of our societies today, brought about by the increasing mobility of people and ideas across national borders. Harmony, on the other hand, is only an aspiration, which may or may not be present in a particular community – some societies have successfully harnessed the power of diversity to promote internal cohesion, tolerance and solidarity, while others have witnessed growing polarization, fragmentation and in the worst case – an open conflict over the differences.

Harmony is impossible in any human context where the trauma caused by structural injustice – discrimination, xenophobia, or various forms of inequality keep people divided and mutually hostile. As the first step towards fostering harmony, the attitudes based on stereotypes, misconceptions and fear need to be transformed. Whether it is in big cities or rural areas of the global North or South, reconciliation of differences is an integral part of building open, tolerant and peaceful communities. Therefore, the fundamental task seems to be the search for an answer to the central question raised by globalization today: how can we channel the power of diversity towards fostering social cohesion and harmony, and away from division, exclusion and conflict?

While seeking the answers, we cannot overlook the age of this question – it can be traced back to the very origins of Western political thought.

The philosophical work of Immanuel Kant and especially his essay *Perpetual Peace* (1795) is to a great extent dedicated to seeking institutional arrangements that can motivate humans of all creeds to live together respectfully and dissuade them to resort to violence for settling their disputes. More than a century earlier, English philosopher John Locke, in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), written in the aftermath of religiously inspired civil war, argued that civil peace requires not uniformity of religion, but on the contrary a framework of toleration in which different faiths can coexist. More recently, political philosopher John Rawls placed the reconciliation between harmony and diversity at the centre stage of his discourse concerning justice and tolerance in the pluralist society. In *Political Liberalism* (1993), acknowledging pluralism as a fact of human existence, Rawls challenges us to seek effective ways of peaceful coexistence. His answer to this challenge lies in justice as the fundamental principle that can promote peace and social stability in a pluralistic society.

Your Excellencies,

Achieving harmony requires promoting global governance, following universal ethical norms in all spheres of life, and seeking social justice. Social harmony neutralizes the causes that lead to the emergence or re-emergence of violence, and fosters personal and social capacity for sustainable peace.

Let us remember that harmony does not mean monotony. Quite to the contrary, it implies plurality and diversity. As you very well know, in music, the most beautiful harmonies are composed for the settings that incorporate diverse instruments that vary greatly by the pitch, rhythm, articulation, dynamics, timbre and texture.

Whether it is a piece of classical or contemporary music, diversity creates harmony, as long as the instruments follow certain general rules of composition or improvisation. In the similar vein, I would argue that a harmonious society does not have to be homogenous society. In fact, real harmony is achieved in a society where the plurality of thoughts, expressions, cultures, and ideas cross-pollinate and feed from each other, and thereby become richer, more dynamic and resilient.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Attaining harmony under the conditions of diversity involves the formation of open and genuine dialogue. And such open and sincere dialogue can only take place when certain political conditions are met.

Those of us that have lived through the dictatorships remember the failure of the experiments to establish social order and “harmony” through force, intimidation and fear. Such “harmony” was only superficial.

Expressed in the words of Gyula Illyes – a Hungarian poet and novelist who stood against the oppression of his native people:

*“Where tyranny exists
That tyranny exists
Not only in the barrel of the gun
Not only in the cells of a prison.”*

To conclude, I will stress my belief that the question is not how to become more similar to each other, but how to lean to respect and to be inspired by each other's' differences.

The answer lies in education. We are all responsible to educate our children in a way that will make it possible for them to harness the energy of pluralism within their societies. Let us learn how we can work together towards a more peaceful and sustainable world. The first step towards this end is to understand our own heritage, to know who we are. We have to protect and study our languages, cultures and traditions, so that we feel secure about our own identities. For it is only after feeling well-grounded and comfortable with our own cultural identities that we can reach out to others, appreciate the differences and celebrate the diversity.

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