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GULNAR GASIMOVA

Philosophical Aspects of Cultural Relationships

Since the mid-1970s, a new approach to the development of intercultural relationships between the East and West has been evolving. In addition to political and economic systems, the phenomenon of culture plays a primary role in regulating a wide range of everyday activities as diverse as the inner life and relations among nations and civilizations. In the contemporary world, the issue of intercultural dialogue between the East and West has been revitalized. As a result, culture is the area of the steadiest interaction and understanding among people. New levels of intercultural communication, contemporary trends toward developing cultural relationships, and the expansion of the horizons of global culture are emerging factors that make this one of the most important issues challenging modernity.

The dichotomy between the East and West is a product of history. According to the Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov,

a large dispute between the East and West spans the existence of humanity. Herodotus dates the origin of this confrontation to prehistoric times. He points out legendary events as the first manifestations of this great struggle between the East and West—the abduction of women from Argos by the Phoenicians and the abduction of Helen from Lacedaemon by the son of Trojan Priam. Originating from such extreme antiquity, this confrontation remains on the agenda today, causing a deep rift among people and disturbing mankind's efforts to live the true life. (1914, p. 3)

Gulnar Gasimova (Kasunova) is an associate professor at Baku State University. Since 2000 she has been the head of the Department of Gender Studies, Peace and Conflict Resolution of the International Center for Social Research, Baku. In addition to many publications she has organized and led numerous workshops and projects on conflict resolution, education, and gender.

Throughout history, many philosophers and cultural historians have expressed their thoughts on the idea of conflict-based separation, as well as the contraposition and eternal controversy of the East and West. Solovev is thus not a “solitary passerby.” However, some historical facts show how dangerous the idea of national, cultural, and historic exceptionality and cultural split can be. The position that confirms the universal importance of mutual understanding among people is gradually beginning to prevail. According to Hermann Hesse, a follower of this movement:

[D]eep and fruitful mutual understanding between the East and West is the mammoth, albeit unmet, demand for political and social life as well as the barest necessity for spiritual life and cultural vitality. The current problem does not concern proselytizing Japanese into Christianity, with Europeans being converted to Buddhism or Taoism. Our duty and desire is not to be converted to any other faith, but to reach as much openness and broad-mindedness as possible: in the wisdom of the East and West, we do not see forces that are hostile toward and struggle with each other—they are poles apart—while life exists in between. (*East–West*, 1982, p. 217)

The East–West system itself has never been stable, its internal relationship being a part of its general development. Against the background of socioeconomic changes, the moving forces of culture—under the influence of different determinants that emerged during the process of historic development—switched from the East to the West and vice versa. Therefore, it is worth reviewing the history.

Christianity is believed to have originated in the Middle East, later spreading across the West. The Bible came from the East. Romans annexed part of the Middle East to the realm of their then-mighty empire, but were not strong enough to surpass those they had conquered in spiritual values. As time went by, Byzantium replaced Rome, and communication between the East and West intensified. However, emerging and developing in different ways, these dealings were also accompanied by struggle.

In medieval times, the multipronged influence of Islam on Europe covered all levels of European society to varying degrees, stretching from everyday life to literature and philosophy, commerce and trade, technical and scientific developments, politics and religion. In the field of literary criticism, there were long-debated issues on the correlation of Oriental and European elements in Provençal lyric poetry, on the Oriental roots of the fabliau genre, and on the likely influence of Arabic thought on the views and works of Dante. In the field of natural history, there are studies on the influence of Arabic knowledge on the development of medicine and astronomy in Europe. In the field of the history of philosophy, there are arguments for and against the degree of

conditionality of Latin Averroism by the philosophical system of Ibn Rushd (Watt, 1976, pp. 13–14), an Arab thinker. There are also issues associated with the influence of Ibn Sina's (Avicenna's) views on the Augustinians in the late Middle Ages, with conceptual categories that were first developed by Muslim theologians and then borrowed by the West.

The emergence of Augustinian thought, enriched with Avicenna's corresponding views, turned out to be one of the most important consequences of the deep penetration of Avicenna's philosophy into the orbit of European scholars. This trend originated in the twelfth century in works that focused on synthesizing the Neo-Platonist ideas of Avicenna with the preceding Platonist Christian doctrines of Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Chalcidius, Boethius, Johannes Scotus Eriugena. In the thirteenth century, this trend was revived with William of Auvergne, the Franciscan scholars of Paris University (Jean de la Rochelle, Alexander of Hales, and Bonaventure), and the English Franciscan scholars (Robert Grosseteste and John Peckham).

Some researchers disclose the influence of Avicenna and Al-Farabi, an Arabic encyclopedist, on Roger Bacon's illuminism, particularly his concept of papal power, which is viewed as borrowing certain political ideas and views from Arab-Muslim philosophers (Zhuravskii, 1990, pp. 12, 21).

Today, we clearly recognize the role of Middle Eastern peoples, their culture and spiritual values, in the creation and development of European civilization. Long gone is the period of domination of Eurocentric points of view in the sciences. Researchers are more inclined to consider the Middle East a source that fed Europe with cultural elements to fill the cultural gaps that existed throughout the mainland. Europe integrated and processed the knowledge necessary to enrich its cultural traditions, where for example, philosophical knowledge was lacking during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Scholars have noted that in the system of medieval Arab culture, Hellenistic philosophy [*falsafa*, in Arabic] was an inconsequential phenomenon—influencing minds rather than determining cultural representation. In the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries, the first signs of European cultural estrangement from the Arab-Muslim world appeared. This alienation, however, failed to curtail ties between the two civilizations. Quite the contrary, diplomatic relations became more coherent, and commercial exchange even expanded. Furthermore, in the fields of natural science, medicine, and philosophy, Europeans continued referring to Arabic sources. Until the sixteenth century, Oriental civilization had maintained a much higher level of development in terms of technology, administrative systems, philosophy, scientific achievements, and so on. It was only in the sixteenth century that Western Europe managed to outstrip the (Middle) East in terms of level of manufacturing standards and scientific developments.

On the whole, in the history of the development of universal civilization, the

cultures of the East and West have constructed a unified globalization process, often conceived as a single entity, a system, that, like any other, had levels and sublevels of its own. Interaction can take place among foundational elements at different levels: ethnic, national, civilization building. Ambivalence is a characteristic feature of the interaction process itself; both mutual enrichment and rejection (in certain periods of historic development) are possible within this process. One other substantial fact must be noted as well: while interacting with each other, each cultural form influences its corresponding counterpart. While preserving its specific features, a cultural form also borrows certain extraneous but corresponding counterparts during this “dialogue.”

Of particular significance in the analysis of intercultural communication is the problem of alignment of the *universal* and *particular* in the world historic-cultural process. The objective character of the analysis of many phenomena and situations arising in the process of sociocultural dialogue is closely related to the extent of a methodologically precise and correct solution to this problem. The study of objective regularities of the integral world of the cultural process, as well as the place of separate national cultures involved in this process, is a problem that presently attracts the attention of many scholars. It is one of the most topical subjects of modern aesthetics and the theory of culture. In the present article, an attempt is made to consider Muslim culture as a part—even the foundation—of national cultures in the context of and in correlation with the universal cultural process.

The universal cultural process has common, universal objective regularities with respect to its development. While distinguishing and studying the *universal* in the global historic-cultural process, scholars often underestimate the *particular*. All nations and regions have distinctive features of their own that are reflected in their culture and produced by various causes. In the scientific literature, the correlation of different cultures is usually considered a correlation between Eastern and Western cultures.

The understanding of wholeness as a mobile dialectic integrity is the methodological basis for the right approach to the East–West issue. The mutually supplementary nature of various constituent components is considered responsible for the unity of integrity. Functional asymmetry, which arises in the process of interaction, is not at variance with only the laws of integrity—it also sets up a stable macrostructural balance. Proceeding from the law of dialectics, it can be asserted that various forms of movement and a lack of convergence of constituent components make possible the process of interaction. Divergencies are the determinants of integrity. Stability is dependent upon the interaction of the *different* with the single integrity. The only true methodological foundation for analyzing the East–West issue is the study of this problem based on an assumption of integrity as the interaction of different mutually supplementary forms.

Based on functional asymmetry, the regularities of the universal cultural process become clear as a single whole. This is incompatible with Eurocentrism and it does not correspond to Oriental centrism—both of which are one-sided.

The issue of historic-typological comparison between Oriental and Western cultures is methodologically important. However, the typological approach seems to be justified to compare the integrity of civilizations based on unified rather than separate components.

Within the macrostructural framework, different cultures interact with one another. The cultural-historical development of both Western and Eastern countries contains common components that are present in the practical experience of different nations. This factor creates the basis for interaction and mutual enrichment of cultures existing in various regions.

Considering the problem of interaction of different cultures as part of the universal process, the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin asserts that significant works of culture cover “a vast space of time.” Bakhtin describes integrity (which Oswald Spengler presented in the form of exclusive monads) as an entity “open” for new generations. It means that in the process of historic-cultural development, cultures become the subject of talks, mutually enriched without losing inner integrity. Moreover, “one meaning uncovers its depths, having met and touched upon another, alien meaning,” Bakhtin writes, “a sort of dialogue begins between them, which overcomes the exclusiveness and unilateral nature of these meanings, these cultures” (Bakhtin, 1979, pp. 334–35). Dialogue among different cultures is a complex process in the course of which another culture, perceived by man, is transformed from personal forms into social ones.

The search for common developmental regularities often leads to the neglect of specific characteristics of one or another national culture. Since studies of Eastern cultures have long been conducted by Western scholars, many processes inherent in the Muslim East were reduced to common laws of the development of Western cultural analysis. Today’s development of Eastern cultural science clearly reveals that in studying the culture of the Muslim East, it is impossible to approach the problem using previously devised schemas or to apply terms that are usually used in the purely Western cultural context. Such “violence” to the material can only result in the distortion of the real picture, ignoring national cultural specifics. In the course of cultural studies of the East, a number of concrete problems are emerging—they are determined by the specific characteristics the development of the Muslim world. In this regard, scholars face certain problems that require the scientific interpretation of numerous unique phenomena and the development of mainly Eastern cultures.

In all non-Western civilizations, religion is a sociospiritual mechanism that performs the function of implementing significant ideas and directives into social consciousness and behavior. There is no society in which religion covers

the aggregate of spiritual activities, no matter how influential the latter might seem. But religion builds up a social mechanism that maintains the accepted type of spirituality, that is, its concord with other forms of social regulation.

Culture in Muslim states bears the impact of Islam, a world religion. The influence of Islam is seen not only in sign-symbolic, stylistic, and other characteristics of Muslim culture, it appears in the character and quality of interaction of separate components of this culture as well as in the nature of the values adopted. Thus, a certain artistic-religious integrity arises, and leads to the development of processes peculiar to the given region. This adds to the distinctive character of Eastern culture as a whole, affecting all levels of the integral cultural system; this specific characteristic, along with some others, constitutes the originality that distinguishes it from foreign, alien cultures.

When analyzing Eastern culture in the context of the universal cultural process, it is necessary to dwell upon differences between Eastern and Western types of spirituality, since “the live existence of a culture is founded on the common forms of world development, as well as on unique objects such as a separately regarded individual” (Vatin, 1984, p. 78).

Philosophical and general cultural comparison studies focus on the issue of fundamental and invariable difference between the East and West, according to type of spirituality. Undoubtedly, this will reveal much that is interesting in the nature of the classic systems of philosophy and culture established in the past, and will define their role in contemporary spirituality.

Particular features of spirituality also dwell upon the richness of cultural content. Generally, the Eastern type of spirituality can be defined as introverted, that is, mainly oriented toward the inner, spiritual life of a human being. The Western type of spirituality is extroverted. In this major difference in types of mentality, the characteristics of spirituality are significant factors that convincingly reveal the distinctness of Western and Eastern cultures.

Two ways of thinking are vitally important with respect to the factors that differentiate cultures. This conclusion is based on the supposition that interhemispheric cerebral asymmetry—Roger Sperry’s epoch-making discovery—has been important for explaining the basic foundations of intercultural distinctions.

It has been reported frequently in the scientific literature that Eastern and Western cultures—and more broadly, Eastern and Western civilizations—were built upon their own genotype and the logic of development peculiar to them. The challenge is to recognize, as clearly as possible, the entire spectrum of the most important factors that explain the specific features of each culture as well as the basic foundations of their distinctive characteristics. The discovery of interhemispheric cerebral asymmetry has turned out to be a step forward in revealing one of the fundamental factors of intercultural distinctions—the two

ways of thinking inherent in human beings. The major difference between these ways of thinking is characterized by the principles of constructing contextual communication among words and images. Depending on these principles, there exist logical thinking (expressed by signs) and spatial-creative thinking. Logical thinking is connected with activity in the left cerebral hemisphere, while spatial-creative thinking involves the corresponding strength in the right hemisphere. The cerebrum is a comprehensive whole, so the above-mentioned ways of thinking are equipollent components of it. Therefore, retaining their particular features, strengths, and weaknesses, these components supplement each other, rather than being connected on the principle of hierarchical subordination.

Depending on the civilization to which they belong and despite the mind's ability to think in both ways, people, nevertheless, think in one way—either logical or spatial-creative—that overarches the other. As a result, certain cultures have a large following among people who—in accordance with the above-mentioned factor of dominance—have predetermined psychological and individual characteristics, ideology, and so on. That is what differentiates one culture from another.

The issue under review involves another vital aspect—the proportion of biological and social factors and the significance of each. During adaptation to the social environment, biological factors also form in a human's phylogenesis. These are the prerequisites for the development of both ways of thinking. Meanwhile, the realization of genetically regulated potential during ontogeny is possible through the process of social communication and only in the context of a certain social environment. In this case, the social factor gains fundamental importance.

A natural question arises: What determines the dominance of one or another way of thinking? Based on the analysis of the cultural-historic process, several factors that influence this process can be singled out: ethnic-psychological and sociocultural distinctive features of the social environment, in which the representatives of a specific culture live an optimal life by influencing the mode of life of future generations. Suffice it to say that the dominance of one way of thinking over the other is largely the result of customs- and tradition-based characteristics of the environment that have embedded the appropriate way of thinking throughout the entire process of historical development. The dominant way of thinking is inherited on the principle of cultural succession, thereby keeping the uniqueness of the corresponding culture alive among many of its representatives. The existence of two kinds of information processing determines space for the coexistence of different cultures on a global scale.

Cultural interrelationship is one of the global trends of development of contemporary cultures and civilizations, while the necessity of preserving the originality and uniqueness of any culture is another strongly supported trend.

A variety of cultures and civilizations, each acclaimed for specific features, forms the basis of the universal cultural process. In the modern world where dialogue among cultures and civilizations is increasingly urgent, it is important to consider the ethnic-psychological features of thinking and mindset, which are closely associated with the specific characteristics of interhemispheric communication.

Analysis of the influence of ways of thinking on a variety of cultures is of great practical importance. This issue bears significantly on the process of interrelationship among different cultures and civilizations, as well as on the process of building up strategies for cross-cultural communication at different levels of interaction in the world community.

The introduction of new elements into Eastern cultural studies and philosophy in recent years has called for a new understanding of the correlation of the common and the specific in the historical process, as well as of the structure and dynamics of this process. There is a considerable gap between the needs of macro theory and achievements in specific subjects that focus on spiritual life in Eastern countries; this can be explained by a conceptual lack of development of the common theory of Eastern culture, which cannot be substituted for by any methods of hermeneutic comprehension, even the most thorough ones. Spiritual artifacts and monuments can only indirectly express historical essence. Thus, conceptualization is needed, which exceeds the limits of hermeneutic interpretation. Clearly, there must have been a period of accumulation and mastery of cultural-philosophical knowledge, work on the sources and their interpretation. Today, enough philosophical material exists for us to make certain conclusions concerning the problems under study.

Any national culture in the system of the universal cultural process can be impartially assessed, first, by taking into consideration the culture's specific character, and second, by studying the culture within the limits of its interconnection and interdependence with other components of the global historical-cultural process. There is a cultural marking space, the axis of which is represented by the problem of identity and difference, where the East and West coexist, constantly interact, and carry on a never-ending dialogue, provided that each has a specific character and cultural traditions of its own. This is the place where they create what is called the integral universal cultural process.

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