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THE CHALLENGES OF UNIVERSAL DIALOGUE: PHILOSOPHICAL IDEALS FOR A MORE DECENT WORLD

ABSTRACT

In this keynote address, I reflect on the origin, history, past accomplishments, and guiding principles of the International Society for Universal Dialogue (ISUD). I also reflect on the future challenges facing our society and the need to critique, clarify, revise, and renew our core principles, values, and ideals.

Keywords: Berlin Wall, “Brexit,” climate change, communication, corporations, dialogue, European Union, freedom, globalization, global warming, human rights, inequalities, intercultural dialogue, international relations, justice, just world order, peace, transnational relations, universalism, world governance

1. INTRODUCTION

As former President of the ISUD (2003–2005), I want to welcome everyone to the opening ceremony of the XI World Congress of the International Society for Universal Dialogue. It is wonderful to come together with so many participants here in Warsaw for this important event. It is great to see so many familiar faces and to reconnect with old friends, but it is also encouraging to see so many new faces here at the World Congress. I very much look forward to our meetings and discussions over the course of the next few days.

Let me take this opportunity to thank our host, the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. I would also like to thank our congress organizers for their many efforts in making this event possible: Professors Małgorzata Czarnocka and Charles Brown. I would also like to thank Professor Emilya Taysina for her work in organizing the review of the conference papers. Finally, I would like to extend a special thanks to our founder and organizer, Professor Janusz Kuczyński, for his many contributions on behalf of

the society over the past few decades. His work continues to be a source of inspiration for all of us.

2. FOUNDING EVENTS: WARSAW AND BERLIN

As many of our speakers today have stressed, 2016 is the twenty-seventh anniversary of the founding of our society which took place in Warsaw, Poland, in November of 1989. So it is absolutely appropriate that we return to Warsaw on this special occasion as a homecoming celebration, but also as a time to reflect on our society, to consider or reconsider our guiding principles, values, and ideals, and to contemplate our future. At the time of the founding of our society in 1989, the social, political, and economic map of the world was undergoing a radical transformation. The old Soviet Union was collapsing, the Berlin Wall was tumbling, and the tendency of the European states was to cooperate economically, politically, and culturally to form an economic-geopolitical block of sorts. Moreover, it seemed at the time that serious steps were being taken by the great world powers to reduce the production and proliferation of nuclear weapons, to resolve regional conflicts, and to address many social problems on the national and international levels by peaceful and cooperative means. In general, there was an optimistic sense that interconnection and cooperation among the states of the world—states which, until recently, had been only loosely related—were becoming more commonplace in the international sphere of the late twentieth century. Against the backdrop of this world historical situation, the formation of our society—at the time called the International Society for Universalism (ISU)—signified the emergence of a new philosophical consciousness—one committed (a) to the promotion of intercultural dialogue as the best means to help actualize the highest and richest human values in all dimensions of life, and (b) to the promotion of a philosophical discourse aimed at the gradual emergence of a decent, peaceful, and just world order. It was hoped that this new philosophical world consciousness, grounded in dialogue, could provide some understanding and solutions to the many problems facing the contemporary mosaic of human societies, and offer practical insights into how to re-structure some of the major world institutions to enhance the evolution of a more peaceful and just world order—one based, not in a Hobbesian state of nature, but in a more civilized state of transnational/intercultural dialogue, communication, and cooperation.

Unfortunately, I was not in attendance at the founding event in Warsaw in November 1989, but I did join the society the following year for the Second International Symposium for Universalism which took place in Berlin in August, 1990. I did so at the suggestion of one of the founding members (and later, ISU president), Professor Michael H. Mitias. At the time, I was a graduate student at Columbia University in New York, and Michael was a friend and

former undergraduate mentor from my days at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi. Michael explained to me that the ISU was unlike other philosophical societies in that it was not just focused on one particular area or problem in philosophy or committed to a particular ideological/philosophical outlook. Rather the ISU was committed first, to a critical, dialogical, and cooperative search for meaning and shared values as well as a holistic understanding of ourselves and the world we live in, a world of unity and diversity, identity and difference. Second, the ISU was practically oriented in that it did not view philosophical discourse merely as an intellectual luxury to be enjoyed by a small class of academic elites but as an instrument for the creation of a more decent human world, a world in which people can live according to the highest demands of the human spirit in its cultural, moral, religious, aesthetic, scientific, economic, and socio-political dimensions. A valid theoretical understanding of the world should be the basis for developing a world atmosphere in which we foster (a) lasting harmony and cooperation between the states and peoples of the world and (b) the richness of cultural diversity.¹ Third, through critique, clarification, and what Charles Brown has called the gentle and forgiving spirit of dialogue, the society seeks to articulate a conceptual framework which can be used as a basis for (a) understanding the present world reality in the richness of its complexity and diversity and (b) providing a suggestive plan for restructuring and re-ordering the major relations and needs of the world's states and peoples—one in which traditional power politics and intrigue is replaced by dialogue, a commitment to ethical principles, and a concern for the well-being of other nations and peoples.²

The discussions in Berlin were dominated by an atmosphere of collegiality, understanding, and enthusiasm for the historical significance of the time and place. There was much emphasis on the importance of east/west dialogue and of the need to construct an intellectual framework within which we can create the possibility of meaningful dialogue (east/west; north/south) and, therefore, the possibility of a better understanding between the diversity of cultures and philosophies. There was also much emphasis on the need for a new form of universalism—one that avoided the totalizing tendencies of the more traditional forms (which tended to swallow up cultural and philosophical differences) and which ensured both the continuity of the best of local, regional, and national cultures and traditions as well as placement in much broader cultural contexts, including perhaps, a universal world culture. The city of Berlin itself seemed to provide a particularly relevant expression of the society's efforts. For while parts of the Berlin Wall were still standing—the symbols of a grim, fitful, and tragic past—there were also huge openings in it allowing the free mingling of diverse groups

¹ For more on this, see Mitias, M. H. 1991. "Challenges of Universalism." *Dialogue and Humanism*, 1, 1, 5–15.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

of people back and forth between the former eastern and western sectors of the city; and large numbers of visitors and residents were relentlessly chipping away at the wall with hammers and chisels. In general, the city exuded a very positive, upbeat atmosphere of tolerance, understanding, and open-mindedness—just the sort of value orientation our society is keen to promote. As Janusz Kuczyński said in his opening address for the First World Symposium, “our universalism is also an intellectual basis for real tolerance and openness and also a truly humanistic, kind-hearted understanding of others.”³

3. HELSINKI AND THE CHALLENGES OF GLOBALIZATION

Fast forward fifteen years: on July 15, 2005 I delivered the Presidential address at the Sixth World Congress of the (now renamed) International Society for Universal Dialogue (ISUD) at the University of Helsinki in Finland. Once again, global changes had occurred that were dramatically transforming the basic structure of international/transnational relations. Any remnants of the Berlin Wall had long since been relegated to museums; the city of Berlin was now the capital of a unified Germany, which in turn, was a prominent member of a vibrant European Union—an organically emerging transnational commonality, committed to divided/limited sovereignty and the principle of subsidiarity, and rooted historically and structurally in the local, regional, and cultural interests and self-understandings of the various member states. (At the time, many hoped that the EU model might offer a regional glimpse of progress towards forging a more decent and peaceful world order.) Most significantly, globalization had asserted itself as a basic feature of the modern world. Economic globalization has undoubtedly contributed to lifting millions out of extreme poverty and bringing prosperity, education, health care, work opportunities, and development to parts of the world which had never before experienced such things (witness China and India over the past two decades). Nonetheless, it also poses a number of daunting problems and ominous challenges for the future—challenges which (as I suggested) call for a radical rethinking of many of the basic ideals, values, and relations that define modern society. In particular, I urged the society to focus on three broad areas of concern: the problem of the physical sustainability of the natural world in the face of climate change, global warming, and increased ecological degradation; the challenge of promoting intercultural dialogue, recognition, reconciliation, and peaceful coexistence in the face of escalating global violence and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; and the challenge of promoting freedom, human rights, and justice in a world increasingly dominated both by extreme instances of economic inequalities and chronic poverty for masses of people, and the unchecked influence

³ Kuczyński, J. 1989. “What Is Universalism?” *Dialectics and Humanism*, 2, 213.

of multinational corporate forces and transnational elites.⁴ There was much serious discussion at the congress about the need to find creative, structural solutions for breaking the current cycle of dominance and economic/ecological/cultural destruction and oppressive anti-democratic and anti-ecological tendencies in order to build a more peaceful and just world through universal dialogue and cooperation.

4. THE CHALLENGES TODAY

In 2016, these and many other global problems and challenges have become all the more urgent and pressing. In the wake of “Brexit” and other fiscal and political difficulties, the EU, and more generally, the post-war architectural structure that made Europe stable and prosperous, is under pressure. Ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, North Africa and elsewhere have generated the worst refugee/displaced person crisis that the world has experienced since the end of the Second World War (and possibly ever). Moreover, there has been a general sense in Europe, North America and elsewhere that the economic dynamics of globalization has been focused too much at the higher levels and has disproportionately shortchanged the least advantaged (even in the developed countries). As a result, income inequality between the top and bottom tenth of the human population is a staggering 320:1, and the wealth inequality is nine times greater still.⁵ These enormous global inequalities—between rich and poor, the global north and the global south—are increasing relentlessly. Along with the increase in global inequality is the accompanying increase in power and influence of multinational/transnational corporations. For example, a 2009 comparison of gross domestic products (GDPs) and corporate sales reveals that, of the world’s hundred largest economies, fifty-six were countries, but forty-four were corporations; and this raises many issues concerning democratic accountability beyond the corporate boardroom and has led some critics to characterize the current economic globalization as “corporate globalization” or “globalization-from-above.”⁶

Moreover, the dynamics of the current economic and “corporate-driven” globalization has been steadily undermining the role of the traditional nation-state as an instrument of human well-being, converting the state by degrees into a subordinate relationship with global corporate and market forces. As a result, many states, even those operating on a secure basis of legitimacy, are losing

⁴ For more on this see Hicks, S. V. 2007. “Editorial Introduction: Rethinking Nature, Culture, and Freedom.” In: *The Challenges of Globalization: Rethinking Nature, Culture, and Freedom*. Hicks, S.V., D.E. Shannon (Eds.). Malden, MA–Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell Publishing, 7–23.

⁵ See Pogge, T. 2008. “Preface,” to *Global Ethics: Seminal Essays*. Pogge, T., K. Horton (Eds.). St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, xv.

⁶ Steger, M. B. 2013. *Globalization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 54.

their capacity to provide for the welfare, security, and economic and social well-being of their citizens on a territorial basis. In the wake of these and other factors, we have witnessed the rise in recent years of radical nationalism, ethnic sectarianism, protectionism, xenophobia, anti-immigrant groups, religious fanaticism, and even global terrorism. Finally, some would argue that the current period of globalization has been the most environmentally destructive period of human history. And despite much discussion about climate change and global warming over the past few decades, few coordinated global measures have been implemented to address these issues; political support has been weak and limited; and many governments and corporations see measures to reduce carbon emissions as threats to economic growth and global competitiveness. In light of all of the above, we should ask the following: how can the states and peoples of the globe be pulled back from their current drift towards a market-driven/corporate-driven/anti-ecological globalism and led to manifest a greater degree of receptivity towards a more “human-driven globalism,” one that could underpin a more rational, humane, and decent governance for the planet? The challenges are huge, and the stakes are high. How best to proceed?

5. CONCLUSION

To paraphrase Kant, the proper social role of the philosopher should be to critique, to clarify, and to advise, to cast a “ray of light” when the leaders find themselves in the dark.⁷ Therefore it is fitting that philosophers and other scholars who are committed to inter-cultural dialogue on these and other great issues of our time, should gather at this World Congress to explore the role of ideals and values across a wide spectrum of theoretical and practical issues; to investigate the role played by ideals and values in an increasingly global social and political life, as well as in the formation of personal and cultural identities, and in the natural and social sciences, in art, religion, as well as in moral reasoning and practice. The ISUD is committed to promoting a more decent, peaceful, and humane world. As such, we will continue to look for new ideas and new sources of inspiration. We will continue to work to forge a more just international economic, legal, and political framework, and to help implement a more rational and democratically oriented, world governance. We will strive to promote discourse on the epistemic grounds of moral judgments and the ontological underpinnings of moral discourse. And we will continue to strive to show how we can have participation in the best of local, regional and national cultures and traditions, as well as a sense of belonging to much broader historical, cultural, and social contexts—including, perhaps, a cosmopolitan world culture and a shared ethical life among nations.

⁷ See Mitias, M. H. 1991, *op. cit.*, 9.

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