



The Quest for Shared Civilizational Values

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Presented to the G20 Religion Forum (R20)
Bali, Indonesia, 2 – 3 November 2022

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Good afternoon. Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to President Widodo and the Indonesian government for sponsoring this distinguished gathering, and to the G20 for acknowledging the role of religion in geopolitical deliberations. I would also like to thank the co-chairs of this event, Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf and Shaykh Mohammad Al-Issa.

The decision to incorporate this summit of religious leaders and scholars for the first time in the G20's annual meeting schedule is a landmark event, and surely most welcome to all of us here today. Yet one cannot fail to notice that it has created a certain amount of puzzlement in international policy circles. Perhaps you have heard questions like: "What has religion got to do with the aims of the G20 to promote global economic stability, growth and prosperity? Or, "How can religion help to meet the increasing challenges to social harmony, political stability and economic growth when it has so often been a divisive element, and when religious teachings have so often been used as pretexts for violence?" And, "How can there be any shared moral and spiritual values, given the great differences among the world's cultures and religions?"

Such questions will hover in the background of our discussions today and tomorrow as we share thoughts on such challenging topics as how to deal with historical grievances, how to reconcile universal principles with respect for cultural diversity, and how to assure that religion will be a source of solutions rather than problems in years to come.

Since I've been asked to offer some thoughts about the subject of this afternoon's panel, "the quest for shared civilizational values", I propose to look at those questions from three angles—looking around, looking back, and looking ahead. By "looking around", I mean taking stock of



the obstacles that face any effort to show that shared values really do exist. In "looking back", I will be asking what we can learn from a similar quest undertaken 75 years ago in the early days of the United Nations. And by "looking ahead", I mean asking what religious leaders and scholars can do to help assure that religion will promote human flourishing rather than foster division and conflict.

Looking around:

Looking around, it's plain to see that one of the greatest challenges comes from the belief of a great many well-intentioned (and well-placed) persons that religion is irrelevant, and potentially an obstacle to the broad goals of the G20.

What can religious leaders and scholars say to skeptics who see religion as outdated and an obstacle to political, economic and social flourishing?

I do not think it would be fanciful to begin by asking them to consider that all the elements of human flourishing promoted by the G20 are currently threatened by a grave environmental crisis. No, I am not referring to the well-known threats to our natural habitat. The crisis to which I refer is far less recognized, and entirely man-made. It is a crisis in our social environments.

The signs are all around us. They are in the fraying of the intricate webs of customs and understandings on which the success of every program, every policy, every law, and every constitution ultimately depends. They are in the deterioration of the multitudinous social structures where those customs and understandings are formed — the seedbeds of the qualities of character and competence that any healthy society requires in its citizens and statespersons. The best economic and social programs the wisest policy makers can devise are just words on paper until they are supported by habits and attitudes nurtured in those seedbeds. And it is at that very basic level that the world's great culture-forming religions have a vital role to play.

Of particular relevance to the goals of the G20 is the fact that globalization, along with its potential to facilitate the quest for shared values by bringing the peoples of the world closer together, has had powerful unintended effects on social environments. In pondering that dilemma, one close student of globalization has noted that, along with its many benefits, globalization seems to have unleashed forces with the potential to "uproot cultures at a pace never before seen in human history." He pointed out that, "You cannot build an emerging society if you are simultaneously destroying the cultural foundations that cement your society and give it the self-confidence and cohesion to interact properly with the world. Without a sustainable culture... there is no sustainable globalization."

If that is correct, it is hard to see how the aims of maximizing globalization's promise and minimizing its perils can be furthered without taking religion seriously. Today we hear a great deal about the negative influences of religion at various times and places, but far too little about the important ways in which the world's religions have contributed to the maintenance of healthy cultures. To be sure, religion is not the only element to be considered, but it is such a major force in most of the world's civilizations that it cannot be ignored. That is why the G20 is wise to take an interest in religion. As Pope Francis has put it, "humanity has been too slow to recognize that social environments, like natural environments, are at risk and need protection" and that we are now in a "human ecological crisis."

And that is why the perennial question of the existence of universal principles has acquired new urgency in today's conflict-ridden, yet increasingly interdependent world.

Looking back:

The last time that question received sustained attention from a multinational group was 75 years ago when the newly formed United Nations decided to respond to calls for an international bill of rights. So it may be helpful to "look back" briefly at what can be learned from that experience. Back then, in the aftermath of World War II, the very idea of widely shared principles was dismissed out of hand by self-styled political "realists," by the international law establishment, and by famous anthropologists who were more interested in the differences among peoples than in their common humanity.

Fortunately, the UN defied the skeptics. And the result was a historic political achievement: the approval of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 without a single dissenting vote. At the time, the UN membership was impressively, though imperfectly, multicultural, and so was the commission that drafted the UDHR.

The leading members of that group were: Nationalist China's Peng-chun Zhang, a philosopher as well as a diplomat; India's Hansa Mehta, a pioneering educator, feminist, and social activist; Chile's Hernan Santa Cruz, diplomat and advocate for social and economic justice; Lebanon's Charles Malik, philosopher, diplomat, and chief spokesman for the Arab League; French jurist René Cassin, who would later win the Nobel Peace Prize; and the American political leader and diplomat, Eleanor Roosevelt, who served as the Commission's chairperson.

Though the UDHR was non-binding, it was a real achievement to have reached an official consensus that some things are so terrible in practice that virtually no one will openly approve them (or openly admit they approve them); and that some things are so good in practice that virtually no one will oppose them (or admit they oppose them).

Today, however, that consensus is faltering. Memories of the terrible wars that shook the world in the first half of the 20th century are fading, and the bloody regional and ethnic conflicts that followed have impaired the sense of the unity of the human family. Some powerful countries are challenging the idea of universal rights in the name of national security or economic development. And some Western groups are using the language of human rights to promote ideas that are not widely shared in other parts of the world, and often not even in their own countries.

It thus seems clear that the time is right for a multicultural, multinational effort to broaden and deepen the quest for shared civilizational values. Indeed, to give up on that quest is to invite resignation to a world where force and violence rule the day.

So, as this R20 Summit takes up the subject of shared civilizational values, it may be helpful to recall the finding of a group of some of the world's leading thinkers that was asked by UNESCO in 1947 to study whether the project of an international human rights document was feasible. The UNESCO group proceeded to solicit the views of religious leaders and philosophers in nearly every part of the world, and concluded that there were indeed a few practical ideas about decent human conduct that were so widely shared that they "may be viewed as implicit in man's nature as a member of society." But they admitted that the task of establishing foundations for those ideas was something they had to leave for another day.

That day has now come, as we convene for the first annual R20 Summit in Bali. Hence, it may be worthwhile to recall two conclusions reached by the men and women to whom the UN assigned the task of actually drafting the UDHR — the members of its first Human Rights Commission mentioned above. After much study and deliberation, they came to the view that: (1) the number of principles that people of vastly different cultures will recognize as universal is relatively modest — not everything that is a right in one or another country can be a universal right; and (2) universality of principles does not mean uniformity in their application. A shared standard can be met by different societies in a legitimate variety of ways so long as — and this is an important qualification — so long as no fundamental right is disregarded.

As the subsequent history of the UDHR experience shows, it is a long step from identifying universal principles to bringing those principles to life in concrete situations. Which brings us to “looking forward” and to the role that religion might play in that effort.

Looking forward:

As we consider the possible role of religion in promoting an international order grounded in shared civilizational values, there is no doubt that religious leaders and scholars will be essential to maximizing the benevolent effects of religion and in countering the distortions that lead to negative effects. But they will have formidable obstacles to overcome.

The unfinished work of establishing that there are foundations for shared civilizational values in the world’s religious traditions will be especially challenging. It will require each tradition to look deeply into its own foundations, and like any process of excavation, that exercise may lead to some uncomfortable discoveries. But it may also produce a fresh appreciation of deep truths that have been obscured over time. Plato in *The Republic* gives us the analogy of a long-submerged statue of the sea-god Glaucus. When it was dredged up, it was so battered by time and torrents, and so encrusted with shells and seaweed that the god’s true and lasting features could hardly be discerned until the debris was cleared away.

Something like that experience was encountered by the US State Department’s Commission on Unalienable Rights when we were instructed by Secretary Pompeo in 2019 to see if the universal principles in the UDHR had grounding in the American political tradition. Our commission was successful in that endeavor, but it obliged us to confront troubling elements in our own tradition. Similarly, in the Roman Catholic religion, the Second Vatican Council had to confront historic injustices committed in the name of Christianity.

Yet another challenge ahead for the world’s religious leaders will be to educate their co-religionists to the rejection of ideologies that manipulate religion for political purposes or use religion as a pretext for violence. And another will be to motivate their followers to live out their faith in ways that actually show their fellow citizens how religion can contribute to the well-being of all.

Finally, it must be said that it will take more than the efforts of religious leaders and followers to maximize the contribution of religion to the great goals of political stability, social harmony, and economic growth. That will require cooperation among many sectors of society. In particular, it will mean countering the extreme forms of secularism that aim to erase religion entirely from public life. Much will depend on whether secularist leaders and their followers can free themselves of prejudice toward religion and accept that religion has a place in public deliberations.

It must be admitted that the aspirations of the R20 are ambitious and the obstacles great. So it is to be expected that they will be dismissed by many as unrealistic — just as the aims of the post-World War II human rights project were dismissed by the so-called realists of that day. Yet the 20th century human rights project proved that ideals are real, as real as earth and water. And today, as this gathering shows, there are many men and women of good will who are ready to take up the challenge of making them real again.

To be sure, the path forward will be strewn with hazards and obstacles. But it's worth remembering that the men and women who dreamed 75 years ago of an international order based on shared values were not naïve in their idealism. They had lived through two world wars and severe economic crises. After seeing human beings at their best and worst, they took encouragement from the fact that while the human race is capable of great evils, it is also capable of imagining that there are better ways to live, of articulating those shared values in declarations and constitutions, and of orienting their conduct toward the ethical norms they recognized.

On the plaza outside the UN building in New York City there is a sculpture that captures something of the idealism tempered with realism that will be required by those who choose to go forward with the effort to identify, ground, and inculcate shared civilizational values. You may have seen it. It is an enormous sphere of burnished bronze, suggesting a globe. Though beautiful to behold, it startles with its imperfection.



The deep cracks in its shiny surface invite the passerby to stop and think. Perhaps it's cracked because it's defective, or perhaps because of some terrible disaster, or maybe (like an egg) it has to break in order for something else to emerge. Perhaps all of those things. When you look into the cracks, there is another brightly shining sphere coming along inside. That one is already

cracked, too! But there is a tremendous sense of dynamism, of potency, of emergent possibilities.

Years from now, people not yet born will form opinions regarding our stewardship of the post-war generation's legacy, which was founded upon idealism tempered by realism. They will pass judgment one day on whether we enhanced or squandered the inheritance handed down by men and women who once strove to bring a standard of right from the ashes of terrible wrongs.

So I will close with profound gratitude for the decision to call this historic meeting in Bali — and with great anticipation for the results of our discussions!