

Clash of Civilizations or Hope For Harmony?

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From December 11 to 13, the fourth annual Alliance of Civilizations Forum took place in Doha, Qatar, a splendiferous gathering at Doha's spanking new convention center, occasion for the opening of Katara, Qatar's huge and gorgeous cultural "village." Over 2000 people from all over the world attended: heads of state, diplomats, non-governmental organizations, business leaders, artists, young people and religious leaders. Banners everywhere proclaimed the theme: "Intercultural dialogue to boost development." So what was it all about?

Large global gatherings are part of the lifeblood of our globalized world and they come one upon the other. Doha overlapped with the much more talked about Durban conference on climate change. Many "stories" about such events are rather banal regurgitations of official news releases or efforts to make something sensational of what often seems a babble more akin to a Tower of Babel than an orchestra composition. But for all their imperfections, these events are markers in collective memories. They provide rare opportunities to take stock of our complex and fast changing world and to challenge us to try to tweak its direction.

The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations is one of the UN's newer entities and it does not fit into any well known mold. Born officially in 2007, it has a very light bureaucratic structure, and it works to keep its focus on annual Forums (like the Doha event), and on the four themes that are the official highlights: youth, media, education and migration. It's not a formal agency but, as the name suggests, a sort of alliance, but it mirrors the UN insofar as governments decide whether to be part of the "group of friends" and also whether they will engage in terms of time and money.

But the back story is more complex. What's underneath it all are two related questions. The first harks back to Samuel Huntington's famous (or infamous) challenge that we face a "clash of civilizations" that will shape future international affairs, and the vigorous debates that continue to this day about whether the "clash" is a myth or a reality. The term "alliance" of civilizations is a deliberate contrast to the notion of a "clash." The Alliance was born of the 2004 challenge by Spain's Prime Minister Zapatero at the United Nations, backed up by Prime Minister Erdogan of Turkey, to build an alliance. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan appointed a distinguished "High Level Group" to reflect on how to do it and, more fundamentally, about the state of global relations. All this was of course colored by 9/11 and threats of extremism in different world regions. The High Level Group's late 2006 report led to the formal birth of the Alliance. So the first challenge is whether this voluntary grouping of nations and other "friends" can counter the ideas of clash and indeed find and create some sort of global harmony, building on humanity's common ground.

The second question is what culture and religion have to do with it all. Can we talk about civilizations and cultures in today's complex world of multiple identities, travel, and social media? And in world affairs, whether diplomacy, development, or defense, how do culture and religion fit? Do they indeed matter? For years the United Nations has grappled, and sometimes fumbled, with the question of how to acknowledge and bring in the voices of culture and religions. Cultural festivals are an accepted element but of course culture is far

more than a festival. Even honoring cultural heritage can spark harsh conflict, witness Cambodia and Thailand's temple battles and Jerusalem.

So the challenge set for the Doha Forum, to link intercultural dialogue to international development and the UN's very tangible Millennium Development Goals, proved far more touchy than the authors probably imagined. A common reaction was the question was pretty much irrelevant. In that sense the plenary speeches followed fairly predictable paths, with repeated exhortations for tolerance, celebration of diversity, to move beyond the stereotypical images a "Muslim World versus the West" or "the rest." A constant message boiled to: "come on, let's build on the large common ground that unites humanity." All this begs the difficult question: How? The presence of a large youth contingent kept the rhetorical focus constantly on young people and there was plenty of talk about women's equality, but the aftertaste was uncertain. The Alliance hopes that its contributions will be practical and so it showcases wonderful initiatives from around the world. Maybe it is this bottom up spirit that can and will bring change.

One feature of the phenomenon of huge global gatherings is that each person takes away their own conclusions, shaped not least by which tiny fraction of the many offerings they can attend and the questions they bring. My own questions center on how the different participants view religious diversity and its link to the development challenges that were supposed to ground the conference, and I was generally surprised and disappointed at how little both the leaders and other participants engaged those questions. With the complex religious dynamics now at work in the Middle East region, many seem reluctant to venture even an analysis. Maybe that's a sign of reflection and humility but it may also be closer to denial and avoidance. That would be too bad.

I also had the opportunity to engage on one of the Alliance's practical initiatives, an exploration led by the government of Switzerland to build bridges across divides, building on the rich network of religiously inspired humanitarian and development works and, more fundamentally, on the true common will to help sisters and brothers in their time of need. The jury is still out on whether this initiative will find traction within the complex world of the Alliance but it's a cause that deserves real support. Psalm 150 calls on us to praise God "with the clash of cymbals" while Corinthians cautions that if "I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal." There's a message there: clashing civilizations may indeed be harsh but with love and compassion and vision to see beyond it's worth the effort to work for planetary harmony.