

The text of Keynote Speech by
Dr. Walter Schwimmer



Former Secretary General of the Council of Europe (1999-2004)
Co-Chairman of the World Public Forum – Dialogue of Civilizations

The spiritual heritage as a source of wisdom in the age of globalisation

Presented at

12th Annual GCGI International Conference and the 2nd Joint GCGI and SES Forum

“The Value of Values: Spiritual Wisdom in Everyday Life”

31 August- 4 September, 2014

Waterperry House, Oxford

Abstract

The spiritual heritage as a source of wisdom in the age of globalization

The biblical words: 'Man shall not live by bread alone ...', spoken 2000 years ago are even more valid in the time of globalization. Human beings are not just tool using animals, ruled by biological drives only, but vision creating beings. Human beings have goals, certainly materialistic ones too, but the visionary goals are idealistic and very often selfless. They are related to religious beliefs as well as to humanistic movements. However, no matter whether a human being considers him or herself as religious, for everybody exists something which is “holy” or “sacred” in his or her mind, may it be some principle, some objective, some relation, e.g. such as family. Mankind cannot exist without spiritual dimensions. Spirituality is releasing blocks, leading to new ideas and guiding people when they need it. But what is most important is the desire which is based in spirituality to help people and make a difference in the world. When the world is going through tremendous changes, the process which is called globalization, we need desperately this desire for reaching out to other people, for solidarity, for a global sister- and brotherhood. When

economic models have reached their height of evolution and technology has evolved, does spirituality need evolution too? Our spirituality, no matter in which civilization, goes 3000 years ago. With spirituality came morals and better ways of thinking. It is part of our collective memory. It is there, everywhere in mankind's mind. All what we need is dialogue among civilizations to unite the spiritual forces for a better world.

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by congratulating my friend Kamran for convening such an impressive attendance at this conference, scientists and theologians, and paying tribute for his endeavours to changing the world for the better. I am neither economist nor a theologian, Kamran is both. So how can I dare to speak to such a distinguished audience about the spiritual heritage as a source of wisdom in the age of globalisation? I am just a former politician who listened on Sunday evening to Prof. Farhang Jahanpour – you remember, he told us that 'Today's politicians are even more stupid than those of the time of the WWI'.

As a former head of the oldest and most comprehensive intergovernmental organisation of Europe, I am sincerely concerned about the perspective for global peace and the geopolitical conditions. When I look out of my window at the Vienna headquarters of WPFDC, Kamran has been there many times, I see a large governmental building decorated with a 16 meters wide double-headed eagle, the symbol of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. 100 years ago it was the imperial and royal Ministry of war, from where on July 29 the orders came to wage war on Serbia in retaliation for the assassination of the Austrian crown prince. The other main European powers jumped on this fatal train and a global catastrophe started.

Was it stupidity or what was it that governments in 1914 suffered from a disease which has not been completely healed since then, namely, autism? They were unable to listen to one another, unable to explain their own position in an intelligent and understandable way.

So, what has spirituality to do with governments and international cooperation? You may be surprised: 47 European governments are officially and legally binding devoted to the spiritual and moral values which are the common heritage of their peoples and the true source of individual freedom, political liberty and the rule of law, principles which form the basis of all genuine democracy. This is a quote from the preamble of the statute of the Council of Europe, the oldest and most comprehensive organisation of European unification. The reaffirmation of that devotion was signed on May 5th, 1949 in St. James Palace in London by 10 European governments and joined afterwards by the 37 other states who joined the Council of Europe and ratified its statute, the latest the Republic of Montenegro in 2007.

Allow me at this stage sidestep and to explain and describe the Council of Europe briefly for those who are not familiar with the European political architecture. As already mentioned, the Council of Europe is the oldest and most comprehensive intergovernmental organisation of the continent. It is not to be confused with the European Union and its institutions, e.g. the European Council which is the organ of

heads of state and government of the European Union. I am used to say that the Council of Europe is the bigger but poorer brother while the European Union is the smaller and richer sister. 47 states are member of the Council of Europe including Russia, Ukraine and Turkey and the small countries like Andorra, Liechtenstein, Monaco and San Marino. Only two European states are not members, Belarus because of lack of democracy and the Vatican State because of its particular status (but the Holy See enjoys observer status with the Council). To keep you confused, but on a higher level, I tell you a short story. As Secretary General had a one hour interview by a journalist of Associated Press on the activities of the Council of Europe and he asked me at the end, why I am sitting in front of the flag of the European Union? I had to explain him that the blue flag with the 12 golden stars is the flag of the Council of Europe which is so to say borrowed by the Union and the same applies to the anthem, the Ode to the Joy of Beethoven. There is a nice but unconfirmed legend about the origin of the flag namely that the designer was inspired by a statue of the Holy Virgin Mary in the Cathedral of Strasbourg, covered with a blue dress and crowned by a wreath of 12 golden stars...

Coming back to the topic of my speech, I searched in vain for other direct references to spiritual and moral values. However I found binding objectives which cannot be understood without a strong moral and spiritual background. The Charter of the United Nations defines the aim of the organisation "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom. The American Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man and the American Convention on Human Rights of the Organisation of the American States contain the "values and principles of liberty, equality, and social justice that are intrinsic to democracy".

You may hold out towards my quotes of international commitments that governments where ever very rarely act in accordance with spiritual and moral values but are driven by very banal interests and act in the best case pragmatically or in the worst case, following Farhang Jahanpour, stupidly . You are right and I agree with you. However, these concrete and solemn commitments give us the opportunity to remind authorities to the spiritual and moral values. And, what is most important, spiritual and moral values are, as the statute of the Council of Europe says, the common heritage of the people. The values are in the heart of the people. With respect to these values, globalization started long before this term appeared in our language.

The biblical words: 'Man shall not live by bread alone ...', spoken 2000 years ago are even more valid in the time of globalization. Not a single world civilization has existed without immutable spiritual and moral maxims, which we call values. The history of humankind has known various values, notions of worthy and unworthy behaviour and of a just structure of society. But you may look to what civilization ever, you will find

one maxim, one rule which is called the golden one, one should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself. The ethic of reciprocity may be explained from the perspective of psychology, philosophy, sociology or religion. Whatever explanation you prefer, human beings are not just tool using animals, ruled by biological drives only, but vision creating beings. Human beings have goals, certainly materialistic ones too, but the visionary goals are idealistic and very often selfless. They are related to religious beliefs as well as to humanistic movements. Moral and ethical values in historical retrospective possess a universal character. The modern-day secular consciousness looks upon religious values as secondary in relation to the dominant so-called liberal or laic standards. However even when contemporary society has renounced its religious roots, no matter whether a human being considers him or herself as religious or not, for everybody exists something which is "holy" or "sacred" in his or her mind, may it be some principle, some objective, some relation, e.g. such as family.

For many centuries these values flowed from a religious consciousness, they were formed within the framework of the believer's perception of the world. Maybe not everybody can agree in this context that common human morality is universal by virtue of the fact that a certain moral codex common for all civilizations is inherent in all peoples and nations. But let me reiterate my conviction that the golden rule is to be found practically in every civilization and religion. The humanism which modern-day secular society has declared is nothing but a kind of superstructure on the religious foundation.

Great pieces of art were created by spirituality, in architecture, gothic cathedrals as well as Arabic mosques, in painting, like the frescos of the Sixtina in Rome, in literature, in music, you all know the examples in practically all civilisations. Farhang Jahanpour fascinated us on Sunday evening with the words of Rumi and other Persian poets. Maybe that some viewers and listeners are only realizing the artistic value, but the majority of people still is feeling the spirituality which brought the pieces of arts to exist, has even in a secular society the feeling for the sacredness. And what is fascinating people who visit the 5000 years old megalithic temples on Malta or not very far from here the site of Stonehenge? There may be the still not discovered way of transportation and construction with the poor means of ancient times, but this cannot explain why day by day thousands of people walk around the Stonehenge columns as I did myself last year.

It was a very hot summer day, no shadow there as you probably know, and despite this inconvenience an endless row of visitors admired this quite unique place. And when I visited on Sunday the Ashmolean museum in nearby Oxford I found in the room of pre-historic Europe artefacts which demonstrate the desire of people living 20.000 years ago for harmony with the nature and the divine.

Mankind, the homo sapiens, could not and cannot exist without spiritual dimensions. Spirituality is releasing blocks, leading to new ideas and guiding people when they need it. But what is most important is the desire which is based in spirituality to help people and make a difference in the world. When the world is going through

tremendous changes, the process which is called globalization, we need desperately this desire for reaching out to other people, for solidarity, for a global sister- and brotherhood. When economic models have reached their height of evolution and technology has evolved, does spirituality need evolution too? Our spirituality, no matter in which civilization, goes many thousand years ago. With spirituality came morals and better ways of thinking. It is part of our collective memory. It is there, everywhere in mankind's mind.

But how can we better use morals and better ways of thinking, the spirituality in our collective memory? Despite all ethical we see like Shakespeare's Hamlet a sea of troubles, so many wars, sufferings and injustice.

This year, 2014, as mentioned before, we are commemorating 100 years of the outbreak of WWI and 75 years of the beginning of the 2nd World War. When we recall the terrible consequences of two World Wars and commemorate with great sadness the death of 100 million people, soldiers as well as civilians, in both wars; when we think about the horrible crimes against humanity including the Holocaust, we may ask how that could happen among civilized people, totally ignoring their common golden rule. This is indeed an often and often raised question when people have been confronted with obvious and significant violations of moral standards, by ordinary people as well as by so-called authorities.

Despite the noble goal of the United Nations, formulated in 1945, "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" and the European peace projects of the Council of Europe and the European Union, we are again confronted with such violations, reaching out to terrorism which sometimes highjacks religion and genocide against those with a different believe, fratricidal war and aggression. Afghanistan, Congo Gaza, Iraq, Syria and now also Eastern Ukraine, these are challenges to the spiritual roots of our values, ending up in the old theological question "How can God allow this to happen?".

I am not a theologian and did not study theology like our chairman Kamran. Therefore I looked for an answer by a theologian and found simple explanation by a Russian Orthodox Bishop who referred to the Judeo-Christian roots, I quote:

"The Old Testament shows us how the life of the chosen people changed fundamentally after it had received the revelation of the one God and followed the path of observing the divine commandments. The Ten Commandments which God gave to the people through Moses became the spiritual and moral foundation upon which Israelite society was built. This does not mean that all of the Israelite people without exception observed the Ten Commandments. The books of the Bible are replete with examples of non-observance of the commandments, the refusal of individuals and a whole nation to follow the divine truth. Yet this truth, this moral basis became the foundation upon which society was built, the spiritual clasp which held together the entire people and made it a single organism."

Today we can often hear the argument of religion's critics as to why, if our ancestors were so religious, was our past so scarred by so many wars, sufferings and injustice, and very often declared as religious wars? The answer to this question is quite simple: the people were given the commandments but they did not observe them.

Indeed, in our day the majority of the world's population – Christians, Muslims, Jews and representatives of other traditional religions – agree upon the content of the Ten Commandments, and yet some of them do not observe them. Many people in their everyday life ignore those values which form the basis of our civilization. It has been said: 'Thou shalt not kill,' and yet people kill and even justify killing, sometimes even with religious arguments."

We are responsible ourselves how to uphold the spiritual and moral basis of our societies, local, national, regional and global. The challenges to our future – global terrorism tries to hi-jack religion, the poverty gap is growing, financial mismanagement in one country has suddenly global impacts, the threats to environment and climate and not to forget migration flows that get out of control – require a collective regional, international and global response which is based on values. Facing these challenges leaves no space for "the clash of civilisations". On the contrary, civilisations are jointly challenged. Terrorism is not the result of one civilisation opposing or attacking another one, no, it is an attack on all civilisations. The same view applies to the problem of poverty, to keeping the economy moving and serving the needs of the people, to the threats to climate and our natural resources or to global migration flows. We need global thinking and global solidarity.

We are still sometimes divided on the responses to common challenges. Some are tempted to find convenient enemies, feeding all sorts of phobias and hatred. But we should not be distracted from the pressing challenges of ensuring peace, sustainable development, human dignity and democracy, because they are the keys to any effective answer.

Mother Theresa said, peace as well as war begins at home. We certainly want governments, and certainly not only governments, but in particular also international players like multi-national companies, as well as international organisations like the UN and the European Union to base their activities on our common values, but to achieve that we have to start at home, with ourselves. I mentioned already the title of the famous book of Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilisations". It's very often quoted, but mostly by people who never read it. I dare to say, there is no clash of civilisations, because civilisations do not clash. But there is often a clash of ignorance. We need no "Islam for Dummies", but also no Christianity or Judaism for Dummies. We need more knowledge about the other, his culture, his traditions, his values. And suddenly we will realise that we have much more in common than we thought before. We don't need to globalise values, the heritage of spirituality, they are already common.

When I said before, Huntington's book is most of the time quoted by people who did not read it, I have to tell you what is written in the very last paragraph.

There Huntington says that the final battle will not be between civilisations but between all civilisations united against barbarism.

All what we need is dialogue among civilizations to unite the spiritual forces for a better world. The tools are there, spiritual heritage and values.

Walter Schwimmer was born on June 16, 1942 in Vienna, Austria where he studied law at Vienna University and graduated doctor of law in 1964. He engaged himself in the movement of Young Christian Workers (YCW).

In 1971 he was elected to the Austrian Parliament (Nationalrat). He was re-elected seven times to the parliament. He was also the Chairman of the Inter-Parliamentary Union friendship group Austria-Israel of the Austrian Parliament from 1976 to 1999,

When the Berlin Wall fell and the division of Europe into West and East came to an end, Walter Schwimmer started to work for the integration of the new democracies as equal partners into Pan-European structures. He became Member of the Austrian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in 1991 and became Chairman of the Group of the European People's Party-Christian Democrats in 1996.

In June 1999, he was elected Secretary General of the Council of Europe (September 1999 - August 2004). One of his political priorities was the inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue. He established close relations with the League of Arab States and was the first Secretary General of the Council of Europe to attend a ministerial conference and a summit of heads of state of the Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation.

In 2005, after his mandate in the Council of Europe was ended, Walter Schwimmer was invited by Vladimir I. Yakunin, the president and founder of WPFDC, to join the World Public Forum – Dialogue of Civilizations and chair its International Coordination Committee. In October 2013, during the 11th annual Rhodes Forum of WPFDC he was appointed at the meeting of the founders Co-Chairman of the organization.

Walter Schwimmer is the author of several books and articles, in particular of "The European Dream", published also in German ("Der Traum Europa"), Italian ("Sognare Europa"), Russian ("Мечты О Европе") and Serbian ("San Evropa").