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*Global Governance:  
The Cultural Dimension*

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**“Global Governance: The Cultural Dimension”**

*by*

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Your Royal Highness,  
Honourable Minister of State,  
President of the Brussels-EU Chapter of the Club of Rome,  
Excellencies,  
Esteemed colleagues and ladies and gentlemen,

It is my honour to present the second address of the 17<sup>th</sup> Aurelio Peccei Lecture to mark the conferment of the Presidency of the Club of Rome Chapter on His Royal Highness.

The subject of this lecture – ‘Global Governance: The Cultural Dimension’ was chosen for two reasons. Because global governance is the defining feature of our age, and because its cultural dimension will, with the passage of time, prove to be the defining influence upon it. For if our grandchildren are to have lives worthy of the human dignity inherited from generations past, we shall need to attain an ‘optimal cultural dimension’ in our emerging global governance that will uplift their own generation and those beyond.

The Club of Rome, having sponsored the prescient and controversial work on ‘limits to growth’ some three decades ago, provided the intellectual seed of today’s crucial concept of ‘sustainable development’. The Club’s recognised role is precisely this – to fertilise the present with ideas of the future. So the theme of my address is how, in this time of civilizational angst and subliminal dread of tomorrow’s events, we might commence our journey towards ‘cultural optimality’.

It is a theme I believe Aurelio Peccei would have endorsed, for his life’s work testified to the virtues of reason and cultural tolerance. This, in fact, comprises my sub-theme – that optimality among our cultures is dependent on the triumph of reason and the display of tolerance. And not just in theory but also in practice. It is therefore my intention to conclude my remarks with a practical proposal for the Club’s consideration.

### **Culture and Governance: The Primordial Link**

The connection between culture and governance is subtle yet compelling. A society’s culture is the defining expression of its underlying beliefs, its daily customs and habits. Culture provides the colours of governance as light flows through a prism.

The force of that light is morality – the notion held deep in the human psyche over what ought to be, what behaviour a man or a woman should observe if humanity is to continue toward a

higher state of being. Moral notions of good and evil have tended in the past to derive from religious traditions and faiths, weaving patterns of thought that form the very fabric of our civilizations.

As the light of morality permeates the prism of human affairs, so our various cultures bequeath to us different notions of the moral good. Each colour casts a different hue on historical events and contemporary issues, different beliefs of what should be, in the future, for ourselves and for the seventh generation ahead. Our culture-bound perceptions of reality take the colours of the civilizational spectrum. We deny the splendour of difference at our peril.

Culture affects the most fundamental issues of all – how we relate one to another and to the larger world beyond. Morality and culture determine how we govern ourselves; how we protect and honour the planet; how we draw insight from, and give meaning to, our very existence. The eternal challenges in human life – the resolution of conflict and the protection of a sustainable environment – are influenced in different ways by our diverse cultures. The link between culture and governance is primordial.

### ***The Cultural *Problématique*:***

#### **The Struggle for Legitimacy in Contemporary Global Governance**

What, then, is the cultural dimension to our emerging global governance? It rests on twin pillars: recognition and respect. Recognition of the fundamental values we share in common – the undercurrents of our mortal existence on the planet together. Respect for our cultural differences – the surface ripples of daily societal life.

But what is this commonality of belief, this corner-stone of shared global values, if it is not the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? Perhaps it is. Yet the Declaration, as a child of our times, remains subject to controversy. It reflects, some say, the pre-eminence of a particular culture at a particular historical juncture – dominantly Western, it is alleged, in jurisprudential content, political imprimatur, and sheer voting strength at the time of its adoption.

Yet does this matter, it might be asked, half a century on? Do Western cultural precepts on citizenship and governance not provide the spearhead for an evolving world? Did the revolutionary tradition of Europe and America not discover, by accident or design, the

universal truths for all humanity? Does it not remain for other cultural traditions simply to ‘catch up’? Has history not finally reached the end, with the triumph of liberalism and modernity, those twin midwives of a relentless globalisation?

Such provocative questions evoke impassioned responses, with many around the world rejecting such claims. The key to global governance, they respond, lies in the West relinquishing the belief that it alone knows best. In this perspective Western culture has not leapt ahead but has stumbled blindly into a moral detour. It is time, they suggest, for the West to rediscover an ancient truth – that excessive cultural pride precedes civilizational perdition; that humility, by contrast, begets respect. It needs to surrender the fallacy that material advantage and the political power it bequeaths in today’s world rest on superiority of culture – the notion that military might is sanctioned through a natural political leadership that rests, in turn, on greater moral authority. That post-colonial delusion, they add, was perpetuated through 20<sup>th</sup> century hegemony, as the torch of leadership passed from Europe to America – from one trans-Atlantic branch of Western culture to another. It lingers even today, when a European leader muses on the superiority of Western over Islamic civilization, prompting a request for an apology from the Arab world.

The nexus between the universal and the particular in human rights remains a vexed issue in today’s world. In a seminal agreement after decades of disputation, the international community recognised the need to acknowledge the significance of our various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds. Yet regardless of our different political, economic and cultural systems, the UN said, we all have a duty to promote human rights globally and in a fair and equal manner. As with all compromises, this leaves the game wide open, with no referee in sight.

What are we to make of this culture-based dialectic between universality and regionality? The issue today is less whether culture-based historical reflections on human rights are valid, than the manner in which modern beliefs are promulgated around the world. The cultural dimension of governance is portrayed in the tendency of societies to fight, aggressively or defensively, for the kind of society they wish to be, or which they believe others ought to be. This syndrome has, since the earliest empires, driven the more powerful societies to recreate others in their own image. Today, as in the past, the leading polities embrace a manifest destiny to lead others to ‘better states of being’.

In modern times this concerns notions of democracy and freedom. When capitalism and communism struggled for the hearts and minds of the world, the West was prepared to risk all. ‘Is there anything’, asked a leading American scholar in the 1980s, ‘worth more than life itself – a value so intrinsically high that it is worth risking the end of humanity?’ Yes, he replied – the values of freedom. This was, he believed, worth raising the risk of planetary nuclear devastation and ‘a billion lives’, over a finite period, from one in ten thousand to one in a thousand. We can, he counselled, give survival of the species a ‘very high priority’ without giving it the ‘paralysing status’ of an absolute value. Some degree of risk, he concluded, is necessary if we are to enhance the quality of life beyond ‘mere survival’. He later became a senior presidential adviser in the early ‘90s.

In that calculated judgement on global triage, no distinction was made between civilians and combatants. Nor indeed was it made in time of ‘total war’ four decades earlier in the skies above Hiroshima and Dresden. “It seems to me”, observed the British leader at the time, “that the moment has come when the question of bombing of German cities simply for the sake of increasing the terror should be reviewed. ... I feel the need for more precise concentrations upon military objectives ... rather than on mere acts of terror and wanton destruction.” The latent reaction to these global moral fiat is the scourge of suicide bombings by young Muslims today, who are also prepared to destroy in order to protect values they hold to be supreme in a new and novel time of ‘war’. One categorical imperative exchanged for another – this one placing God before human freedom and survival.

Today the cultural tone of leadership for global governance is more triumphal. The values of freedom, says the American president, are ‘right and true’ for every person in every society. Their protection is the duty and the common calling of freedom-loving people across the globe and across the ages. Today, we are told, the US enjoys ‘unparalleled military strength’ and ‘great economic and political influence’. The US will use this moment of opportunity, we are assured, to extend the ‘benefits of freedom’ across the globe. It will work actively to bring the ‘hope of democracy’ to every corner of the world. The US welcomes its ‘responsibility to lead’ in this ‘great mission’. The Greater Middle East Initiative is the latest, disputed, manifestation of this calling.

For his part the UN Secretary-General issues a plea for moderation. No one model of democracy, he says, is suitable for all societies. Let us not, therefore, look to the ‘export of one form of government’ from one part of the world to another. Let us focus, rather, on the

common challenges to governance today and ensure that democracy is at the heart of all our solutions.

To whom are we to listen for guidance, in this time of global need? There can be no contest, ever, between the faint melody of universalism and the trumpet-sound of national belief. But the question is misplaced, for at the end of the day we must each make our own judgement. And in doing so we must listen to our own hearts. For the question is not who is right but what is legitimate. Beneath the tramp of military feet that sustains political leadership lies moral authority from whose soil legitimacy grows. Today the moral authority of contemporary global governance has weakened, not only from the kaleidoscopic spectacle of recent months but from systemic phenomena of recent decades. Yet the cultural asymmetry present in the constitutional design of the Security Council remains untouched.

The cultural *problématique* we face today is the underlying struggle for global legitimacy. Behind the diplomatic sword-play, political rivalry and military combat that currently passes for global governance lies a contest for the hearts and minds of humanity. Three claims to legitimacy contest the terrain of popular opinion. Secular universality, reflecting the modern revolutionary tradition, underpins the UN Charter, uniting an otherwise divided establishment of national governments. Secular liberalism inspires ideological commitment to radical change for the world, and questions the ‘unique legitimacy’ of the United Nations itself. And, of course, divine revelation, fostering at times an artificial moral clarity with its unyielding dualism of good and evil, challenges both.

The tragedy of our time is that the proponents of these competing world-views have stopped listening to each other. And they seem to be settling in for a military solution to their differences. When Iran’s call for a ‘dialogue among civilizations’ was effectively rejected, philosophical empathy, such as it was in the political realm, dissipated. Nothing constructive has taken its place. An absence of official dialogue, a mutual vilification, and preparations for a military solution, make for a dangerous world.

### **‘Cultural Optimality’: The Key to Global Legitimacy**

However anthropocentric it may be, the human story is meaningless without teleological purpose. Humans must believe in progress, however rough the terrain, however slow the pace. History is no circle around which we mindlessly plod in eternal repetition. Rather

might it appear to us now as a tender helix, its rungs dimly perceived as it curves into the mists of time – fragile rungs that we must climb with great generational care.

Our progression into that future is marked by revolutionary moments, nodal points of change, when our principles and precepts are rewritten, at least for a time. We may be experiencing such a moment now. We have, says the Secretary-General, come to a fork in the road, a moment perhaps no less decisive than 1945, where radical change may be in order. A high-level panel has been set up to report to him with an analysis of future threats and challenges and recommendations on how best to respond.

At such a point in time, we must address the underlying issue of competing claims on global legitimacy in order for a genuine philosophical dialogue to open our political eyes once more, and for our national aspirations, truly seen, to merge with the planetary interest we all share.

But it is one thing to offer a philosophical critique of our present condition. What initiative, of a substantive nature, might be taken by governments to demonstrate the kind of inter-cultural respect espoused by the Club of Rome, and indeed by UNESCO?

We need a political signal of some kind. Such things are, in today's tense and fractious world, of the utmost importance. What signal can the international community send to mark the beginning of a common global culture? What action might the West, still the pre-eminent power centre in the world and with the greatest cultural influence on global policy-making, take to show good faith to other cultures?

One initiative that could be made immediately has to do with our choice of calendar. On what moral or juridical basis do we use the Christian calendar for international dating? Who decided, *Anno Domini* 1946, that all UN documentation should use this method? What do the other proud civilizations – Egyptian, Chinese, Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim – make of the United Nations, which stands as the institutional embodiment of the emerging global community, when it dates its decisions according to one historically-specific calendar? Why are we all in apparent agreement that we live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century today? Twenty-first from what? From the life of a prophetic figure, with a universal message from a particular religious and historical tradition. Not exactly the correct signal for a global, secular institution.



I say this as one whose personal values have been deeply fashioned by that very tradition, and who aspires still to live by its ethical precepts. We must honour the prophets from all our cultures, whilst listening to the cadence of their singular message to our rapidly changing world. Their most profound message is the natural unity of humankind, and it is this to which we must respond.

The international community could therefore agree to date its work at the United Nations by the year of the United Nations itself. We would thus be in year 59, and all decisions and reports would not only be so numbered but also dated accordingly. This is, of course, in no way to denigrate the Christian calendar as a priceless historical tradition to be followed by a particular cultural group, or other calendars such as the Hindu, the Buddhist or the Muslim calendar. It would simply be to introduce a cultural balance in our global institution. Perhaps all major calendar systems could also be listed, just as six official languages are used. The Jewish year, for example, is 5764, the cyclical Hindu year is 5106, the Chinese year is 4702, the Buddhist is 2545, the Christian year is 2004 and the Islamic year is 1424.

The use of a calendar, some might contend, is a trivial matter before the great strategic issues of our day but in fact it is not. For gestures make a difference. Like the earliest sign of human recuperation from disease, it would signal a turn-around in the global mindset. We currently suffer from a pervasive global ailment – a ‘cultural skew’ that accords privileges of power to some and not to others. Yet those who enjoy the privileges bequeathed by the system today hold the keys to its transformation tomorrow. This first key could unlock the door to a process for a more profound inter-civilizational understanding – of the kind that our President, HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal, promotes with his many projects.

So the initiative must come from the powerful and it must be sacrificial. As the patient senses a new energy return to the body, a new sense of well-being and renewed zest for life, so the global community might, through this initial gesture, retrieve its moral compass and commence the journey toward ‘cultural optimality’ and, ultimately, political redemption.

The adoption of a ‘UN calendar’ could, others might contend, send the wrong signal of a fraught secularity in preference to a religious-based and time-tested tradition, albeit culture-bound. Who wishes, they might ask, for the spiritual impoverishment of a global bureaucracy? But this, too, is to miss an underlying truth. For the universalism for which the United Nations stands as a symbol of past aspirations for human unity and the future beacon of perpetual peace has a spiritual dimension of timeless magnitude.

Let us remember, for example, the ‘prayer and meditation room’ that is located inside the UN building itself. When I am in New York I go there at the start of each working day. Sitting usually with a few others, colleagues and visitors alike whose particular faiths we do not know, I feel at one with humanity and at peace with the world. And let us reflect upon the accompanying inscription for the room, written by Dag Hammarskjöld, the political saint of our modern age:

“We all have within us”, he said, “a centre of stillness surrounded by silence. This house, dedicated to work and debate in the service of peace, should have one room dedicated to silence in the outward sense and stillness in the inner sense. It has been the aim to create in this small room a place where the doors may be open in the infinite lands of thought and prayer. People of many faiths will meet here, and for that reason none of the symbols to which we are accustomed in our meditation could be used. However, there are simple things which speak to us all with the same language. We have sought for such things and we believe that we have found them in the shaft of light striking the shimmering surface of solid rock. .... [T]he stone in the middle of the room has more to tell us. We may see it as an altar, empty not because there is no God, not because it is an altar to an unknown God, but because it is dedicated to the God whom Man worships under many names and many forms.”

Hammarskjöld’s own personal spirituality beckons us over the intervening years. The power of simple, universal ideas is what moves humanity forward. As he put it shortly before his death, we can only, like our ancestors, press against the receding wall that hides the future. As we proceed together into that future, hesitant and not without fear, fear of ourselves and our Promethean powers that perhaps do not grace us well, let us resolve that the cultural foundations of our global governance will have the strength of common conviction, the resilience of diverse belief and the temperance of a mutual respect one for another.