

The Role of the Religious Actors in Achieving the Utopia of Alliance of Civilizations: Pope's Visit to Turkey

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Paper to be presented at "Making Sense of a Pluralist World: Sixth Pan-European International Relations Conference" Turin, 12-15 September 2007

Abstract

In 2005, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, launched a new initiative called Alliance of Civilizations which is co-sponsored by the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey and the Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero of Spain and supported by the British Prime Minister Tony Blair. The motivation behind the Alliance of Civilizations Initiative is to bridge divides between Islamic and Western societies which has become more significant after the September 11th and to establish a coalition which will advance mutual respect for religious beliefs and traditions. Alliance of Civilizations is certainly an antithetical move against Samuel P. Huntington's clash of civilizations theory. It aims at overcoming prejudice, misconceptions, misperceptions, and polarization which potentially threaten the world peace. In this regard, this is a difficult task; deliberately it is a utopia.

This paper aims at analyzing the role of the religious actors in achieving the objectives of the Initiative and takes Pope's visit to Istanbul in November 2006 as a sample case to be discussed upon. Pope's visit to Turkey is considered as a symbolic motive having political, historical, cultural and social elements that distinguish it from any other actor's potential visit to Turkey. The main question of the study is to find out the role of this visit in creating tolerance and encouraging inter-cultural dialogue in the international political arena; namely for the accession of Turkey to the European Union. In the study, secondary sources are used to identify the issues involved and a special coverage of national and international press is also included.

Keywords: Alliance of Civilizations, Turkey, European Union, Religious Actors

Introduction

The Alliance of Civilizations Initiative has a divine aspiration of bridging divides between Islamic and Western societies. "Alliance of Civilizations" is intended to respond to the need for a committed effort by the international community, both at the institutional and civil society levels, to bridge divides and to overcome prejudice, misconceptions, misperceptions, and polarization which potentially threaten the world peace. Alliance of Civilizations is certainly an antithetical move against Samuel P. Huntington's clash of civilizations theory as Huntington claims that in this new world order the most persuasive, important, and dangerous conflicts will be experienced between people belonging to different cultural entities (Huntington, 1996). Gartzke and Gleditsch (2006) suggest that culture and identity influence dispute patterns, but there is little evidence that conflict is more common between states where the dominant groups come from different cultural affiliations.

The main idea of the initiative is to create a mutual understanding between the Islamic and Western societies by establishing a coalition which will advance mutual respect for multiculturalism. It is expected that the initiative will lead to a close association of nations, formed to advance the cultural and the societal coherence. From this point of view, the "Alliance of Civilizations" initiative should be regarded as a modern supplement to overcome the widening cultural gap between the societies. The initiative is simply an effort to rephrase the "other". Up to now, the world has been too eager to identify the dissimilarities, from now on it is expected that the world will be concentrating on the possible resemblances needed to build a cultural coherence on.

In practice, interaction is inevitable. There has always been interaction between the societies. Historically, the Mediterranean has been the major economic platform aligning diverse perceptions within the sacred benefit of trade whereas the borderlines acted as middle grounds for the cultural mediation (Goffman, 2004). However, throughout the time, the growing awareness of common interests in economics fostered the Western countries to have a shared collective future beyond the capacity of individual states as most of the Islamic countries were not able to create a similar stimulus for growth. At a much more individualistic approach, only Turkey among the Muslims succeeded in articulating meaningful attachments for individuals to the issues of the modern world.

The “Alliance of Civilizations” initiative seems like a trial case to manage perceptions that build up consensus among the nations which will contribute to the sense of consciousness of the world as a single place. We need to create a global society where men and women from different origins accept and respect diversity. This is quite a difficult task for most of the countries as the majority of their population lives within the cultural space of their own nation. Societies live in their own environments even though contemporary media sources feed them continuously with superficially intense information from all over the world. However, what is kept in mind, the final perception is important.

The integrated and predictable pattern of behavioral practice shows that there is a tendency to be a part of a single cultural identity, which results in prejudice, misperceptions, and polarization in the society. The most crucial part of the “Alliance of Civilizations” initiative is to transfer the intellectual consensus into reality, into practice. The success of this initiative is dependent on the power of its reflection in the society. The intellectual presence of consensus bridging divides between the societies should be transformed into the popular culture of the contemporary world in order to be understood and followed by the masses.

In that respect the icons and the role models of the modern world are deemed to play an important role in bringing the scene the novelty of alliance of civilizations which will be constructed upon the *global-ized* perceptions. It aims at creating new *global-ized* perceptions that serve to overcome the societal factors which potentially threaten the world peace. In this regard, this is a difficult task; it is a utopia.

This paper aims at analyzing the role of the religious actors in the modern world in achieving the objectives of the Initiative and takes Pope's visit to Istanbul in November 2006 as a sample case to be discussed upon. Pope's visit to Turkey is considered as a symbolic motive having political, historical, cultural and social elements that distinguish it from any other actor's potential visit to Turkey. The main question of the study is to find out the role of this visit in creating tolerance and encouraging inter-cultural dialogue for the Turkey's potential accession to the European Union.

The Alliance of Civilizations Initiative: Is it too far beyond believability?

The Alliance of Civilizations Initiative aims at responding to a broad consensus across nations, cultures and religions that all societies are interdependent, bound together in their development and security, and in their environmental, economic and financial well-being. The Alliance seeks to forge collective political will and to mobilize concerted action at the institutional and civil society levels to overcome the prejudice, misperceptions and polarization that militate against such a consensus. The Alliance will address dominant narratives in diverse societies, with the aim of providing an effective response to emerging threats to world peace emanating from hostile perceptions that foment violence. The Alliance will seek to bring about cooperation between various initiatives aiming to bridge these divisions (The Alliance of Civilizations Initiative Concept Paper, 2005)

The Secretary-General, in consultation with the co-sponsors Turkey and Spain, established a High-level Group (HLG) of eminent persons to provide the guidelines for the Initiative. The High-level Group met five times from November 2005 to November 2006, at the conclusion of which it produced a report which takes a multi-polar approach within which it prioritizes relations between Muslim and Western societies. The Report of the High-level Group was presented to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and to Prime Ministers José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on 13 November 2006 at the final meeting of the High-level Group in Istanbul, Turkey. In April 2007, following consultations with the Heads of Government of Spain and Turkey, the co-sponsors of the Alliance of Civilizations, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has designated Jorge Sampaio, the former President of Portugal, as High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations.

The debates on civilizations and conflict offers a diversity of views and theory-building often advances with the increasing number of comments on the issue, however in reality the most important aspect is to achieve success in practice. Alliance of Civilizations: Report of the High-level Group tries to clarify the main obstacles in attaining mutual understanding and consensus among civilizations and perceives religion as an increasingly important dimension of many societies. Religion may play a critical role in promoting an appreciation of other cultures, religions, and ways of life to help build harmony among them. The High-level Group suggests that in order to strengthen the role of religion in alliance of civilizations, there is a certain

need of exercising responsible leadership which will not be destructive but will eliminate the fear and suspicion that grips communities throughout the world and will serve to promote understanding among cultures and mutual respect of religious belief and traditions.

The Role of Religious Actors in World Politics: Pope's Visit to Turkey

The recommendations of the High-Level Group simply assign the religious leaders as the potential practitioners of the Alliance of Civilizations Initiative. This task derives from the soft power that the religious actors bear. Power is the main focus of attention in political science. In that respect, soft power as an alternative to the traditional definition of power based on political, military and economic dimensions emphasizes the ability of ideas, culture, information and values to shape the behaviour of the others (Hastedt and Knickrehm, 2003). Joseph S. Nye (2003) defines soft power as the ability to get what you want by attracting and persuading others to adopt your goals. It differs from hard power, the ability to use the carrots and sticks of economic and military might to make others follow your will.

The soft power of the Roman Catholic Church as transnational religious actor grows not only with the pronounced trend towards administrative and doctrinal centralization but also with the homogenization and globalization of the Catholic culture at the elite level throughout the Catholic world (Haynes, 2001). Even though the traditional position and attitude of the Catholic Church towards political issues are shaped with the principle of neutrality towards all forms of government, with the combination of globalization and homogenization the Roman Catholic Church has developed extensive transnational links which have important ramifications for the development of local and interstate religious–political cultures; especially on the future of the European Union (Karner and Aldridge, 2004, Geoffroy M. 2004). Nelsen and Guth (2003) claims that the European integration has explicitly been justified by reference to the shared identity, building on its Christian heritage and the core of secular Western Europe has preserved Christianity largely. However European enlargement has renewed religious vitality and introduced new dimensions into the Europe's political and social life.

Enlargement; with the remaining candidate states; the long-awaited Turkey, in that respect has raised questions on the European religious identity. Jones and Bijl

(2004) suggest that the categories of similarity that will have an effect on dispute propensity is likely to depend on the degree of community, or sense of 'weness' among the constituent members. Therefore the support from the Christianity is a crucial issue for Turkey, in attaining public support for full membership. The prospect of Turkish membership has raised questions on whether a country with a Muslim majority could become part of a 'European identity' (Dittrich, 2003). The previous comments of the Pope Benedict XVI criticizing Islam and opposing Turkish membership in Europe were in line with the thoughts of the European skeptics who are against Turkey's candidate status to the European Union.

In November, 2006 (on the 28th and 29) Pope Benedict XVI visited Turkey for the first time. The Pope said the goal of his visit was dialogue and reconciliation between Christians and Muslims. The Pope mentioned that his visit was a commitment for understanding between cultures, between religions, for reconciliation (The Guardian, 28.11.2006)

Turkey's Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, told reporters after a brief meeting with Benedict at the airport here that he had asked the Pope to support Turkey in its attempt to become a member of the European Union. 'He said, 'You know we don't have a political role, but we wish for Turkey's entry into the European Union.' Mr. Erdogan said the Pope told him. 'His wish is a positive recommendation for us' (The New York Times; 29.11.2006). As expected, the Pope's promising approach to the Turkey's accession to the EU has been evaluated as a piece of political stagecraft presented at a delicate time both in relations between Muslims and the West and in Benedict's own damaged reputation among Muslims by the leading international press including Financial Times, New York Times, The Guardian and the BBC.

Conclusion

The most crucial part of the "Alliance of Civilizations" initiative is to transfer the intellectual consensus into reality, into practice. The success of this initiative is dependent on the power of its reflection in the society. The intellectual presence of consensus bridging divides between Islamic and Western societies should be transformed into the contemporary world in order to be understood and followed by the masses. From this point of view, the Pope's visit to Turkey may provide a sample of cultural respect and coherence for the initiative of "Alliance of Civilizations". Turkey

is a modern, secular Muslim country, bearing the objective of becoming a full-member of the European Union but the candidate status of Turkey is not supported by the European due to the different identity the country bears.

The Pope visit to Turkey had three important aspects with regard to the expectancies of the Alliance of Civilizations Initiative. First of all the visit was totally a success for both of the parties to show positive gestures embracing each other. Secondly, contrary to what was expected by the international press, the presence of the Pope was very much welcomed by the Turkish people and thirdly the visit had concrete outputs in achieving understanding between cultures, between religions, for reconciliation.

The most important outcome of the Pope visit to Turkey has been the support and acceptance of Pope to Turkey for the European Union membership. The soft power of the Pope has considerable credibility among the Catholics. Later in May, 2007 Speaking to the Italian daily La Stampa, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State has signaled that the Holy See will support Turkey's bid for membership in the European Union. The European community can accept the membership of an overwhelming Islamic society, he said, as long as "fundamental rules of cohabitation" are firmly in place (Catholic World News, 30.05.2007).

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