

**World Civilisations: “Bridging the World’s Divides”
BP lecture by Mr. Kofi Annan
British Museum London
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Thank you Neil and Jon for that welcome.

Thank you as well for BP’s continued support for this lecture series on world civilizations, which, I believe, is even more important today than when it started a decade ago.

May I also offer my warm thanks to Niall FitzGerald and the Trustees of the British Museum, and to its Director Neil MacGregor, for helping to build new understandings of our changing world.

There can be no better venue to discuss the wide-ranging topic of world civilizations than here at the British Museum.

Through the British Museum’s seven million objects, you chart and explain the history of civilization.

You show clearly how ideas have been exchanged, borrowed and adapted between cultures throughout the ages.

It is a powerful antidote to those who view our history as a series of “clashes” in which one side triumphs and the other defeated.

Indeed, we can trace some of humanity’s greatest advances to those times and places where this peaceful cultural co-operation was at its most intense.

An embrace of differences – of opinions, of cultures, of beliefs and ways of life – have long been a driving force of human progress.

Differences should not be feared. But the danger is they can become irreconcilable divisions, leading to fear, mistrust and conflict.

So the challenge I want to address tonight is how we celebrate and harness this diversity for good while preventing differences hardening into entrenched and bitter divides.

Bridging divides and building consensus is an area where I have a little experience.

If there were to be a job specification for UN Secretary General, it would be the quality which would come right at the top.

I remember during a discussion on Security Council reform how a representative of one of the leading countries asked me why it was taking so long to make progress given that God managed to create the world in seven days.

I joked back that his task was easy as he did not have 192 masters to serve.

Progress is rarely easy or straightforward. But in many ways, the respect and dialogue needed for understanding between communities and countries should be easier now than ever before.

Economic integration and rapid communications have brought different races, cultures and ethnicities closer together, breaking down old barriers and creating new realities.

We are almost instantly affected by what is said and done across the other side of our planet.

The cross-fertilization of cultures which is so important for progress and prosperity is taking place every day in almost every community.

We are tonight in the middle of a true world city. When the Olympics are staged in London in two years time, competitors from every nation will find fellow countrymen and women living here to cheer them on.

This very diversity is what makes London such a dynamic, exciting and successful community.

But as well as new opportunities, globalization has also brought new risks, fears and dislocations.

Our world may have grown smaller. But this can make the divides –the inequalities of wealth, of influence and opportunity, between genders, races and religions – all the more obvious and painful.

We have seen increasing disparities in wealth and power both between societies and within them.

Conflicts between countries have, thankfully become less common.

But conflicts and tensions within societies and between cultures have become more prominent.

Wherever we look – whether at peace and security, at trade and markets, or at social and cultural attitudes - we seem to be in danger of creating an age of mutual distrust, fear and protectionism.

Terrorist attacks, war and turmoil in the greater Middle East, ill-considered words and disregard for sacred symbols and practices, have all inflamed tensions between different peoples and cultures.

They have notably – and worryingly - strained relations between followers of the three great monotheistic faiths.

We live in a time when unprecedented numbers of people of different creeds or culture live side by side as fellow-citizens.

But the misconceptions and stereotypes underlying the idea of a “clash of civilizations” have become more widely shared.

Some groups seem eager to foment a new war of religion on a global scale.

And the insensitivity with which the less powerful minorities or migrants are sometimes treated, makes it easier for these sentiments to take root.

Disillusioned with globalization, many people are retreating into narrower interpretations of community.

This leads in turn to competing values systems, encouraging us to exclude fellow human beings from our empathy and solidarity – because of different religious or political beliefs, or even skin colour.

Many people particularly in the Muslim world, look at the West as a threat to their beliefs and values, their economic interests and political aspirations.

Evidence to the contrary is simply disregarded or rejected as incredible.

At the same time, many in the West dismiss Islam as a religion of extremism and violence despite the history of commerce, cooperation and cultural exchange this Museum so clearly highlights.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have seen within our own lifetimes the disastrous consequences of such divisive value systems: ethnic cleansing, genocide, terrorism and the spread of fear, hatred and discrimination.

I know I am not alone in urging that we overcome these resentments and establish relations of trust between communities.

How do we achieve this? I am afraid I have no instant or easy solution. I can offer no short cuts.

The answer lies, as always, in promoting dialogue, respect, tolerance and understanding.

It is, as I know from my time at the UN, hard, painstaking, often frustrating work.

But no matter how unpromising the climate, it is about making the arguments, bringing people together, slowly building trust.

It is about stressing that in a world of interdependence that compromise and mutual respect is the only route to lasting peace and security.

So we all have to find within us the courage to celebrate our diversity but also the commitment to tackle the gross inequalities which scar our world.

It needs a recognition that every community, including a global one, has to be underpinned by shared values which protect the weak and vulnerable if it is to be secure and prosperous.

Here we are fortunate. For these values - compassion; solidarity; respect for each other - already exist in all our great religions.

We can begin by reaffirming and demonstrating that the problem is not the Koran, nor the Torah nor the Bible.

As I have often said, the problem is never the faith. It is the faithful, and how we behave towards each other.

It is these great, enduring and universal principles which are also enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We can use these values – and the frameworks and tools we have based on them - to bridge divides and make people feel more secure and confident of the future.

But to achieve this, they have to be turned into a reality in every country and community.

The Universal Declaration has been accepted in legal systems across the world, and become a point of reference for all those who strive for human rights and justice in every country.

But still many hundreds of millions are denied even their most basic rights.

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We saw, too, ten years ago how the UN's Member States came together to reaffirm that freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature, and shared responsibility were "essential to international relations in the twenty-first century":

All countries adopted practical, achievable targets – the Millennium Development Goals – for tackling extreme poverty and extending education, basic health care and clean water to all.

Despite progress, we have a long way to go to turn these promises into reality.

Indeed, recent events show that universal values are more acutely needed, in this age of globalization, than ever before.

For the plight of the world's poor has been made worse with the combined impact of the global economic crisis and climate change.

Both are crises created in industrialized countries but whose effects are felt hardest by the poorest countries and most vulnerable communities.

Much can be done to fulfill basic human rights and human needs if governments lived up to their solemn commitments.

The least developed countries have grown familiar with being told that resources were lacking to meet such pledges.

But we have now seen how governments raised extraordinary sums to bail out financial institutions and provide for domestic stimulus packages.

As Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said mischievously at the Copenhagen Summit last year: "If the climate were a bank, the capitalists would have saved it long ago.

The serious point is that globalization will not bring peace or prosperity unless we all share fairly in its benefits.

To regain legitimacy, the global economy must be guided by an ethical framework that addresses the gross inequalities in our world, and meets the basic needs and aspirations of people everywhere.

Nor can our global institutions play their essential role in building consensus and bridging divides unless they are reformed to reflect the realities of today rather than sixty years ago.

We are seeing new powers emerging eager to share global responsibilities. Respecting diversity on the world stage means giving them the opportunity to play their role.

Rather than be alarmed, we should welcome this return to multipolarity. It will require reconciling a more diverse set of interests and values but it promises a much stronger foundation to address shared threats and challenges.

All of these are important steps which will help improve relations between countries.

But they will have limited impact if the current climate of fear and suspicion continues to be re-fuelled by political events, especially those in which Muslim peoples - Iraqis, Afghans, and perhaps most of all the Palestinians - are seen as victims of military action by non-Muslim powers.

We may wish to think of the Arab-Israeli conflict as just one regional conflict amongst many. It is not.

As I know from my time at the United Nations, no other conflict carries such a powerful symbolic and emotional charge among people far removed from the battlefield.

As long as the Palestinians live under occupation, exposed to daily frustration and humiliation, passions will be everywhere inflamed.

It may seem unfair that progress in improving relations between fellow citizens should be held hostage to a solution of one of humanity's most intractable political problems.

And certainly the lack of such a solution must not be used as an excuse for neglecting other issues. But in the end the linkage cannot be wished away.

We need urgently to work on both fronts at once - seeking both to improve social and cultural understanding between peoples, and at the same time to resolve political conflicts, in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Ladies and gentlemen, encouraging trust and dialogue also needs our universal values to be embedded at the level of communities.

We now have abundant research showing the benefits that migrants can bring to their new homelands – not only as workers, but as consumers, entrepreneurs and contributors to a dynamic culture.

You see these rewards here in the increased prosperity and influence of this great city.

But too often these benefits are not evenly distributed or appreciated by the existing population which can see immigrants as a threat to their material interest, security and traditional way of life.

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In Europe especially, governments have been slow to grasp the need to develop strategies for integrating new arrivals into their society or expected them to conform to a static vision of national identity.

As a result, many second and third generation migrants have grown up in ghettos, facing high rates of unemployment, relative poverty and crime.

They feel despair and isolation. In turn, they can find themselves regarded with a mixture of fear and contempt.

We have to have the confidence to embrace diversity, to focus on what we share without forcing everyone into out-dated conformity.

Our societies are constantly evolving, constantly changing. We should not fear this but welcome it.

The protection of the law to eliminate discrimination and build a tolerant diverse societies is important. But it is only a starting point.

Education is central to any strategy to build bridges within and between communities so myths and distortions can be seen for what they are. And here, I wish to stress the utmost importance of eliminating discrimination against girls and women

Freedom of expression should be cherished while working with the media to prevent it from being used to spread hatred, inflict humiliation or incite violence.

Rights have always come with responsibilities. We should try to exercise them with sensitivity, especially when dealing with symbols and traditions that are sacred to other people.

We should think far more carefully, for example, about the wider impact of bans on headscarves or minarets.

My home is in Switzerland. The notion that a country so successful could be threatened by two more minarets on the landscape owes more, I'm afraid, to political appeals based on fear rather than logic.

In my view, those societies that consider themselves modern need to recognize that modernity does not automatically generate tolerance.

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In turn, societies that put a high premium on tradition need to recognize that they survive best, not when they are rigid and immutable, but when they are open to new ideas, from both within and without.

All this puts a heavy burden on our leaders in politics, in our faith communities and in civil society.

They have to take the lead in raising awareness, but also be outspoken in condemning intolerance and extremism unconditionally.

Our faith leaders have to be ready to emphasise the common values between religions and not to leave the floor to those who exaggerate or distort differences.

Our business leaders must ensure that enterprise creates opportunity not just for economic growth but also for social cohesion.

The media, too, must ensure that all voices are heard and not just those that shout loudest.

For we all have a responsibility. We each have to be ready to correct stereotypes and distorted images, to ensure the crimes committed by individuals or small groups don't dictate our image of an entire people, region, or religion.

We have to be prepared to speak up for victims of discrimination and of humiliation.

Our universal values oblige us to show the same respect and sensitivity for people of other communities that we would expect to receive ourselves.

It is easy to be tolerant of those with whom you feel comfortable or share your opinions. The challenge is always to tolerate those with whom you disagree.

For universal values do not mean an end to diversity. Their function is not to eliminate all differences but to help us manage them so we all benefit.

In the end, we must uphold the principles of dialogue and tolerance. Without them there is no peaceful exchange of ideas, no way to bring people together, no chance of arriving at mutually agreed solutions.

Distinguished guests, I don't for a minute underestimate the challenges we face.

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In many ways, the rifts are bigger, and more dangerous, than when this lecture series began a decade ago - a year before the terrible attacks of 9/11 and the responses it provoked.

But we should be optimistic. The overwhelming majority of people of all faiths, backgrounds and nationalities share the same decent values and ambitions for their families and communities.

They want to live in peace, reject extremism and violence, and support cultural and religious diversity.

And if we need encouragement, we need look no further than the achievements of the individual who delivered the first BP lecture.

Twenty years ago this month saw Nelson Mandela's release into a society seemingly irreversibly split by the evil of apartheid.

It was disfigured by huge and ugly chasms in wealth, power and opportunity solely on the basis of ethnicity. Many believed an explosion of violence was inevitable.

He is a man who understands the value of dialogue and tolerance, of respecting our differences but celebrating what we hold in common.

Thanks to his extraordinary leadership, vision and courage - and a yearning for peace among all the people of South Africa - this terrible fate has been avoided.

If we can find in our hearts the same qualities, we too can bridge the divides in our world.

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