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## DIALOGUES AND CONFLICTS OF CULTURES IN THE CHANGING WORLD

## Introduction

“Dialogue” and “conflicts” of cultures are vitally important for us in the world of expanding Russophobic prejudice and sanctions with increasing polarisation of thought and opinions between different cultures.

“Dialogue” is bilateral communication with the purpose of achieving objectives between people who are different.

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Psychologically, it requires a number of behaviours to be deployed.<sup>4</sup> It is much more than just talking.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See for example: *Scollon R., Scollon S. Intercultural Communication. A discourse approach.* Cambridge (MA) : Blackwell, 1995 ; *Carbaugh D., Gibson T., Milburn T. A view of communication and culture: Scenes in an ethnic cultural center and a private college // Emerging Theories of Human Communication / ed. B. Kovacic.* Albany (NY) : The State Univ. of New York Press, 1997. P. 1–24 ; “Dialogue” in cross-cultural perspective: Japanese, Korean, and Russian discourses / D. Carbaugh, E. V. Nuciforo, M. Saito [etc.] // *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication.* 2011. № 4 (2). P. 87–108.

<sup>5</sup> Which is arguably what the then British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss tried in her meeting with our Foreign Minister Lavrov Sergei Victorovitch in Moscow on 9 February 2023. Mr. Lavrov later characterised the meeting at

“Conflicts of cultures” is a wide ranging topic covering all the possible flashpoints between different peoples, which can to a degree be mitigated by “cross cultural education” together with an open mind.<sup>1</sup>

It should be possible for different people, with differences between them to live together, to be able (at the least) to tolerate those differences, certainly to respect them, and when necessary be able to have dialogues to find mutually acceptable compromises or positions. Cultural exchange is vital to the ability to have such meaningful dialogues. The topic also invites thoughts upon the role of diplomacy and diplomats in the changing world.

### Presentation of culture to the outside world

As an Englishman<sup>2</sup> the Russo-British cultural relationship is of interest. A recent meeting with the British Ambassador to Russia heard about the British Government’s “ongoing dedication” to Russian schoolchildren and students in the acquisition of English language and culture. A major component of spreading English language and culture abroad is the British Council.<sup>3</sup> However, the British Council is inactive in Russia, as a result of inconsistencies in its legal documentation.<sup>4</sup> The role has been passed to the Cultural and Education Centre of the Moscow Embassy. To find out more, I met with the British Embassy’s Cultural Minister, formerly Deputy Head of Mission.

The Embassy Centre maintains only one resource in its “ongoing dedication” for Russian students – a channel on

the Foreign Ministry as being “like the conversation with a deaf person... who is here, but does not hear” (See: Sergey Lavrov dismisses Liz Truss meeting as ‘like talking to a deaf person.’ URL: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/boris-johnson-and-liz-truss-urge-russia-to-back-down-over-ukraine-d27ns5w8b> (accessed: 01.06.2023)). A characteristically articulate and colourful quotation from someone who is no stranger to cross cultural dialogue from his position of fluency in at least five languages and over 50 years in the Foreign Service.

<sup>1</sup> The famous quotation “The mind is like a parachute; it works best when it is open” is well known. An internet search claims it to be by the western rock musician Frank Zappa, but deeper research shows almost simultaneous appearances in British, American and Australian newspapers in October 1927 when “western” parachutes were first coming into recognised use. However the words were in use here much earlier, but Gleb Evgenyevich Kotelnikov – the Russian inventor of both the knapsack and drogue parachutes in 1911 – is a name hardly known in the West. His grave can be found in Novidovechiy Cemetery in Moscow – and particularly beautiful it is too.

<sup>2</sup> One of apparently only 200 who (against UK Government advice) remain in Russia. We 200 may not be Ambassadors in the sense of being State Representatives, but we are surely representatives of our culture – carrying within ourselves that which – in the words of Rupert Brooke – is something that England bore and shaped. The famous British espionage writer, John Le Carré in his book “The Russia House” has his lead character Barley express the opinion: “As to his loyalty to his country, Barley saw it only as a question of which England he chose to serve... He knew a better England by far, and it was inside himself.” I am reminded of a discussion in London in the 1990s with a Russian who had travelled to the UK during Soviet times. They related that their first item of business on entering the country had been a meeting with a representative of the USSR Embassy, who reminded them that they were effectively ambassadors for their country, and to show only their best qualities. Thus, the topic of Dialogues and Conflicts of Culture begins, as it must, with us ourselves being the best examples of our own cultures.

<sup>3</sup> The British Council ([www.britishcouncil.org](http://www.britishcouncil.org)) founded some 89 years ago is funded and sponsored by the British Foreign Office. It works in over 100 countries, with a mission of British cultural and language education; It has an audited budget of almost 1 billion GBP (latest available audited figures for 2020–2021). It is not without controversy, for example having been involved with undisclosed taxpayer funded trips for Members of Parliament, and the exclusion of Chinese dissidents from the London Book Fair, It is considered a “soft arm” of British foreign policy.

<sup>4</sup> The Council was previously active in 4 cities in Russia, namely Moscow, St Petersburg, Ekaterinburg, and an additional library facility in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk mostly serving expatriate oil and gas workers.

VK. This has daily posts – with topics such as vocabulary for parts of an animal, or an online test to check your level of English. The Council website tracks visitors from Russia, and directs you to a page which further directs you back to the Embassy Centre. A “magazine” – really a blog – on their global website however gives more information, such as regular articles about topics considered important<sup>5</sup> as regards British culture and language.

Turning to the Russian equivalent of the British Council, we have the Russian World Foundation.<sup>6</sup> This has Centres<sup>7</sup> – currently 79 in 40 countries, “...created with the aim of popularising Russian language and culture as a crucial element of world civilisation, supporting Russian language study programs abroad, developing cross-culture dialogue and strengthening understanding between cultures and peoples.”

The website – in both Russian and English – is a rich source of topics on cultural events, notable people, topics of arts and technologies. It also maintains a real magazine, published in both hard and digital versions<sup>8</sup> – each issue running to 100 pages – with the tagline “a magazine about Russia and Russian civilisation”. It is apolitical, and each month contains topics on a wide range of aspects of our life, culture, language and history here.

An objective comparison of the outputs of the British Council and the Russian World Foundation’s is beyond the scope of this paper, but in my opinion Russian World easily scores 5+, and the British Council 2– (and that is generous).<sup>9</sup> I put this to the British Cultural Minister, suggesting that the UK should really look to the Russian World Foundation’s output and duplicate it, making copies freely available. The idea has been “taken away for consideration”.

### Exchange of information between cultures

The Native American Blackfoot tribe have no word for dialogue, nor words for discussion, debate, nor even verbal interaction. They do have a word – *sitsipssat* meaning to speak with, but it means expression rather than interacting with others. They do however have a word for a person who is an incessant talker, not interacting enough with others – *i’poyiipsti*.

The Chinese have a number of words that reflect the English notions of “dialogue”. The word *duihua* is the most relevant being used at State and other official levels. Formed of two characters, the second means “utterance”, something that is said. The first however has multiple meanings in different contexts. It can mean “to answer”, or “face to face”. Culturally though, it describes talking and an ex-

<sup>5</sup> For example, on 24 March 2023 an article “Five films for Freedom, queer cinema and censorship – what are the challenge of making queer films in countries with repressive regimes.” My only comment here is “их нравы...”

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://ruskiymir.ru> (accessed: 01.06.2023). The foundation was created by Presidential Decree in 2007 as a government sponsored organisation aimed at sponsoring Russian language and culture worldwide, cooperating with the Russian Orthodox Church in promoting values that challenge the Western cultural tradition.

<sup>7</sup> Currently none apparently in the UK. Although there are over 104 pages of results of topics detailing various cooperations with parts of the UK, schools, groups, and events arranged by the Russian Embassy in the UK.

<sup>8</sup> See: <https://m.rusmir.media/numbers/> (accessed: 01.06.2023).

<sup>9</sup> British readers will not be familiar with the typical system of school “marks” for work, being more used to an A–E classification, or a number out of 10. In my personal opinion, in UK terms, Russian Foundation magazine clearly scores an A+ or 10/10. The British Council output barely achieves an E or a 1/10.

change of thoughts and opinions between two or more persons. Examples at State level in Chinese media<sup>1</sup> reflect the cultural expectation that talk between different peoples is not merely the two directional flows of communication, but also reflects the prestige of the people taking part – being representatives of the country, and the seriousness of the items under discussion. Culturally, a Chinese diplomat, will expect a willingness on the other side to be open minded, to be willing to be constructive and work towards solving problems – improving or adjusting problems in their relationship.

Our growing connection with China makes this a fruitful topic of exploration containing lessons for any and all cross-dialogues. Other words meaning “dialogue”, including *jiaoliu* and *goutong* contain themes of “flow”, and “exchange”. More deeply though, a “gou” is a ditch or channel. Hidden in *goutong* is a belief that the dialogue will result in an unblocking of that ditch or channel together with *zhencheng* and *shizai* (truth and sincerity, and without embellishment or exaggeration), that is speaking from the heart, or soul. Without these, there can be no meaningful dialogue.

No wonder then that Russia and China enjoy more fruitful dialogue and collaboration than Russia and the United Kingdom, judging by the performance of the UK’s then Foreign Secretary in February 2022.

#### Behaviours in the exchange of information between cultures

The role of a diplomat is interesting. By looking at some behaviours in the exchange of information between cultures we can better appreciate how (good) diplomats work in their dialogues, and find themes that we can usefully deploy in our private lives.

“Dialogue” generally means verbal interaction between two or more parties – ranging from cooperative to competitive. There is a backdrop of exchange, a mutuality of interdependence, where the unblocking of the ditch has mutual benefit.

They can range from formal to informal in a collaborative atmosphere – with sincerity and openness to that which is being communicated by the other party. As to the substance, this can range from the presentation of one’s viewpoint, describing and clarifying issues, seeking shared understanding, repairing misunderstandings and agreeing future collaborations of actions.

There can be negative or positive consequences. A party can be insincere – perhaps overtly conniving, or passively inexpressive leading to a lack of fruitful outcome. There may be selfish interests at work, and such examples are clearly negative or somehow bad. This speaks to the previously stated idea of being the best versions of ourselves and our culture.<sup>2</sup> We can have our own views which we express, but we must be open and receptive to the views of others.

<sup>1</sup> Recent examples include dialogues between China and other countries regarding questions relating to Taiwan and the Kashmir Region – questions which are characterised by very different positions of the State parties.

<sup>2</sup> It is always interesting to find comparisons between cultures – by being yourself cultured, and inquisitive about other people’s cultures. In English, you would use the phrase “until the cows come home” to describe something that you will be waiting a long time for. In Russia, there is an equivalent “когда рак на горе свистнет” for an idea of “неизвестно когда” or “после дождика в четверг”. When this came up in a professional meeting, it was a source of bilateral interest, amusement, and even extended into good

The more you can understand about the philosophical and cultural traditions of the party on the other side of the table, the better the chances for both parties to unblock the ditch. Knowledges of topics such as history, geography<sup>3</sup>, language, literature, music, film – containing the threads of a civilisation’s tapestry increase the chances of success.

When there are calls for “dialogue”, expectations are created, that can be different in different cultures. Finnish for example has a difference between *vuoropuhelu* and *keskustelu* – merely talking together as opposed to an expected quality of discussion.

#### Islamic Law and Culture when embedded in societies that do not identify as being mainstream Islamic

This is a traditional area of conflict between cultures – more notably since 9/11 and an American centered so called “war on terror”, which often appears as demonisation of Islam and its followers. For those of us who live in Russia, this seems strange, for we have many millions of citizens and neighbours who are Muslim, with whom there is peaceful coexistence. This diversity is of course recognised in our Constitution.

This topic is broad and deep – and many fascinating texts have been written. A recent contribution looks at legal issues.<sup>4</sup> The author describes Sharia law as a universal system of social regulation due to the coverage of its prescriptions with the most diverse – almost all – aspects of external behaviours. Fiqh – Islamic jurisprudence – is usefully described as the human practice and understanding of the Sharia – which it expands and develops by interpretation. Thus Sharia, which is immutable and infallible, is informed in its application by fiqh, as a result of interpretation of the Quran and Sunnah by Islamic jurists. It is suggested that without an appreciation of Sharia law and fiqh – and the culture which surrounds these, dialogues for mutual benefit and resolution of problems with these cultures will be less than successful. Such knowledge can be beneficial within the fields of State Investment Arbitration and financing practices.

#### UNESCO

Kofi Annan<sup>5</sup> once said: “*The United Nations was created in the belief that dialogue can triumph over discord, that diversity is a universal virtue and that the peoples of the world are far more united by their common fate than they are divided by their separate identities.*”

humoured toasts to our respective animals during dinner. The linguist will also know that these also include a concept of “deceived hopes” and “vain promises”. Such as an idea being “taken away for consideration” (see above).

<sup>3</sup> For example, knowing that Rostov and Voronezh are parts of sovereign Russia – something that Liz Truss was unaware of when asked by Mr. Lavrov if she recognised Russia’s sovereignty over these regions – as reported by Kommersant the next day. This was all a week or so after she had announced that Britain was sending supplies to “its Baltic allies across the Black Sea.” Most people know the Baltic and Black Seas are two separate bodies of water – some 700 or 800 km apart. Indeed, as the Official Spokeswoman of Russian Foreign Ministry, M. V. Zakharova said: “If anyone needs saving from anything, it’s the world, from the stupidity and ignorance of British politicians.” It is impossible to disagree with her. I put it to the British Ambassador herself in a meeting with British nationals in March 2020, that our cross cultural dialogues would be significantly improved if the Embassy here could do a better job of briefing these politicians.

<sup>4</sup> Сюкияйнен Л. Исламское право и диалог культур в современном мире. М.: ВШЭ, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> The Secretary General of the United Nations (1997–2006).

Conflicts are mostly the result of intolerance born of ignorance. In a diverse world, there are golden opportunities for sharing and learning about differences. This can be a driver for peaceful coexistence between different peoples.

Such learning should entail sharing ideas and differences with the intent of developing deeper understandings and appreciation of different perspectives and practices. UNESCO has much to say on the topic of intercultural dialogue<sup>1</sup> – including the overarching idea that it fosters social cohesion and helps to create an environment conducive to sustainable development. A more connected world does not mean that we necessarily have to live together, but rather that we are increasingly required to find ways to live together with our differences.

Barriers to effective cross-cultural communication include a tendency for people to filter their thoughts and experiences through the lens of their own culture – a form of cultural prejudice. This westerner sees this all too often in western media coverage of our life here. It should not be forgotten that the post Second World War European space was effectively “de-Europeanised” as a result of the Marshall Plan, linked with the 1947 Dunkirk Treaty, the 1948 Vandenburg Resolution, the Brussels Treaty, the Modified Brussels Treaty and finally the NATO Treaty with its nineteen<sup>2</sup> further State accessions and incremental eastwards expansion of the NATO border towards Russia.

### **In education**

In my field, the development of legal positions for Claimants and Respondents in Moot Court Competitions is relevant. It gives dialectical training, based on a single given case study of facts. Valid positions can be argued for both sides. Competitions are based on arbitration, where one party will win. However, when used in a negotiation setting, it is possible to use these party positions to encourage real dialogue between opposing parties and find common, and beneficial solutions. This is part of the negotiation training that we encourage in students at MGYuA.

### **Conclusions**

Our life here is radically different to that in the West – the history and culture are different. A western centred “one size fits all” view is not appreciated here. The Russian World Foundation shows many aspects of our culture that are different. The Russian *dusha* is more attuned to fruitful dialogue and exploring alternatives with an open mind with a counterparty. Those who wish to do business with Russia, or at least co-exist peacefully, would benefit from coming here with an open mind, learning about the history and culture and participating with pleasure in the way of life. But beware, you may not want to leave.

<sup>1</sup> See: Intercultural Dialogue. URL: <https://en.unesco.org/themes/intercultural-dialogue> (accessed: 01.06.2023).

<sup>2</sup> Soon to be twenty apparently.