

## Many Cultures, But Only One Civilization

The topic of our forum focuses on *universalism*, and we shall speak about *globalization* during subsequent panels, which means that we shall deliberate on something global and universal at the same time.

Both adjectives, *global* and *universal*, are of Latin origin, and they are close in meaning. They signify something of general nature, something ubiquitous, common. Still there is an important difference between the two. Whereas *global* (from Latin *globus* or ball) denotes something that pertains to the whole of Earth (hence — globalization), the word *universal* (from Latin *universalis*) denotes a totality of things, notions, attitudes, which is not permanent, but subject to change. Let us say, the word may denote the totality of people.

It is pertinent to recall another term – *a universal*. In the Middle Ages philosophers denoted general concepts as universals and debated their origins. We may summarize their arguments as follows.

We often use words *species*, *genus*, *phylum*, *type*, but we rarely ponder over their origins. As early as in the classical antiquity philosophers asked themselves a question, if species and genera exist independently, and if so, are they corporeal, or do they only exist in one's mind? And if their existence is singularly mental, are they isolated in our mind from the feelings or manifested in sensual phenomena?

First formulated by a Neoplatonic philosopher, this question begot a thousand-year long scholastic dispute about the nature of universals. The problem,

which was solved differently by nominalists, realists and conceptualists, stimulated development of logic and ontology and helped to systematize theology. The dispute continues to this day, as the central problem of modern-age philosophy is the search for the sources of accurate knowledge: still connected with the problem of universals, this dispute has moved to the plane of linguistic behaviour as the terminal conceptual reality.

Let me now pass to the subject matter of this speech.

What is globalization?

I think it is evident nowadays that globalization is a general trend of contemporary development, causing eruptions of archaic forms and sentiments in societies, which undergo modernization, surges of fundamentalism in religious cultures and a cult of national and cultural exceptionality. Under these conditions an unmastered past threatens to become an option for the future. To avoid this end it is not enough to react to the challenges and contradictions of globalization, but it is required to build moral and intellectual alternatives to the threats it harbours, in the framework of universal values and global interests.

It is clear that we live in an era of globalization, but it is equally clear that we have entered a period of global crisis, which defies the established formulas for resolving crisis developments. These latter include the environment, the world of finance, the arms race, the flow of refugees and the demographic situation. The philosophy of modern age set the task to study and harness the nature. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars established the idea of co-evolution — concurrent development of man and nature. But it appears that fragile balance between our natural and created environment has been disturbed.

Is there then an intellectual alternative to the global crisis?

Europe relies on a great heritage: that of classical antiquity, and of Christianity.

From classical times, we have inherited — helped by the development of grammar, logic and rhetoric — faith in the power of the human mind. In the words of the Georgian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili, rational thought “tied the knot of history”. The advent of Christianity introduced to the European mind an equally dynamic structure, a tripartite structure of the Symbol of Faith and the idea of man’s ethical ascent.

These two beginnings have shaped, and continue to define, the unique nature of European history and culture, including as it does within it a dynamic intellectual force, a flexible system of values and concepts and the ability to model and forecast social progress. These principles allowed Europeans, in their search for a better life, to be phenomenally creative in fields as diverse as philosophy, the arts, the economy, the concept of the division of powers, law and more.

In these innovations lies the contribution of Europe to modern civilization.

Grammar, logic and rhetoric reflected the Greeks’ rational choice for their children to write well, think critically and be able to persuade.

The practical sciences, wrote fourteenth-century English theologian and philosopher William of Ockham (Occam), are the subjects of the *trivium*, logic, grammar and rhetoric; for they are all the outcome of voluntary acts of understanding and so of human actions.

There are two reasons to prefer a quotation from Ockham to one from St. Augustine, who preceded the Englishman by a thousand years and treated the

subject in similar terms. First, it is interesting to consider the question formulated by Mamardashvili: where did the Greek thought reside when the ancient Greeks themselves were gone, and the audience for their philosophy lingered to re-appear? The answer follows from Ockham's statement: their philosophy survived in the language.

Secondly, my premise is that while it is legitimate to relate St. Augustine to the universalism of faith, William of Ockham completed this tradition at the threshold of the universalism of reason. The topic of this forum, *In Search of Lost Universalism*, induces me to consider the question: has universalism really been lost?

Let me return to St. Augustine, for in his treatise *De ordine* (*On order*) we encounter an early theological description of the above-noted disciplines on language and its use — grammar, logic and rhetoric. This systematic method later acquired the famous name of *trivium*, from a Latin word that means “the place where three roads meet”.

At this symbolic crossroads the spiritual leaders of Christianity convened as early as in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, displaying great mastery of the *trivium* in their disputation of the divine precepts. Of these first and foremost was the dogma of the Holy Trinity, which was by that time dissociated from either the totemic myth or the Greek cult of the triple-faced Hekate. However the New Testament contains very few references to the trinity of God, and it took theologians almost three centuries to resolve their doubts and reconsider, if only along major lines, the teaching about the essence of God. The doctrine eventually developed during the Ecumenical Councils in the 4<sup>th</sup> c., and the relationship between three divine persons was proven. Three persons of the Godhead, perfectly equal, exist in a harmonious and transparent relationship with each other.

Equality and transparency is the keynote of our story. In the age-old struggle for the division of powers, from the English Magna Carta in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, transparency and equality were born from a formally identical intellectual exercise. Christian history persists in the long-term deliberative memory by way of constant interpretation of its immanent meaning.

Judging by the writings of prominent historians, the first centuries of Christianity make up, from the viewpoint of a modern person, a stupendous age marked by passionate discussions on religious dogma, but also by the wide spread of corporal religious practices in the imitation of the passions of Christ. These practices ranged from the vows of obedience, lent, celibacy and hermitage to various forms of mortification of flesh and self-torture. What surprises us is the fact that people accepted and placed their faith in one God, who exists in three persons. Indeed, there is good reason to be surprised as thousands and then uncountable millions followed His word.

To St. Augustine we owe a formula: “Seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand”. St. Augustine did not believe for the sake of knowledge (as was the case of Copernicus or Galileo, who had to take the consequences of their knowledge), but for the sake of understanding. Understanding what? Understanding the New Testament, which brings us the news of the Atonement. Unable to cleanse himself from the original sin and its consequences, man was redeemed by God Incarnate; hence Christianity is not worship of God in His contrast to man, but a religion of humanity.

St. Augustine also said: “Tantum cognoscitur, quantum diligitur” (“One can know something only insofar as one loves”); he believed that the ideal of love embraces redemption by Christ of the sins of mankind. Absolved from the duty to go through the passions of Christ, man was to *understand* the meaning of His

atonement death and build his life on earth accordingly.

We established where the Greek wisdom lay when the ancient Greeks disappeared. It subsisted in the language. There are many languages in the world, of course. There are natural languages and professional languages – the language of philosophy, theology, physics, or that of social science. However thought is not wholly synonymous to language, to knowledge or to a notion. It is a concept, from the Latin term *conceptum* — a fetus. Expressed in language, thought is present in our mind.

So where is that source of thought, which evades formalization, be it through computers or by any other means? Is it not astounding that when we speak we hear and perceive words, their meaning and significance, and not just physical sounds? And how is it possible to conceive and create something that has never existed before? Yet examples of human creativity abound. Apart from technologies and equipment, apart from the modern cities, mundane objects and works of art, which is to say apart from the world's *second nature*, examples of creativity include the institutional notions of the independent judiciary, free press, division of powers and modern democracy.

Language then should become the focal point of our deliberation. Every language harbours the mystery of its origins, forcing us to recognize our imperfection, which we strive to outgrow. We attempt to excel ourselves in the natural language, through logic (a discipline of reasoning), grammar (the language science) and the art of rhetoric, which is responsible for verbal communication. We aspire for perfection in the religious and secular arts — through music, poetry, artistic imagery and symbols. We wish to perform in politics and social life — through division of powers, law and independent courts. Say nothing of the modern communications — the press, radio, cinema, television, the Internet. If we

succeed in our attempts to excel is another question. But it is beyond any doubt that we should continue thinking about the remarkable insights, discoveries and inventions, which preceded the modern era and lay the basis for the subsequent development of human knowledge of the universe, self and society.

What we said before is related to culture. Specifically, it is related to the civilization, as there are many cultures (and many languages), but only one civilization. Let us illustrate this point after making several remarks about culture.

It is known that the European culture of modern times developed as a natural form of substituting the religious cult, as a means to secularize Judeo-Christian notions about the creative work of God. It was secularization that undermined the authority of God and of the Christian church, elevating instead the authority of reason. This is not to suggest that reason abolished faith, and faith stopped availing itself of reason. Secularization stemmed not from the lack of faith, but from unchastity and dissolute morals widely spread among the Catholic clergy, including the Papal court. These circumstances gave rise to a wide movement for the reform of Church dogmas and rites. The process was compounded by the first tangible successes in urban construction, industry, science and commerce. In the modern age of globalization, five hundred years after the Reformation, the old debate about universals gains a new momentum. It is considered today in terms of the diversity of world's cultures and societies, in the context of paving some universal path of development. To put it otherwise, it is treated from the positions of *diversity in unity*. «There are many cultures, but only one civilization».

A scientist may have phrased it differently: culture *and* civilization. A journalist could have well contrasted the two: culture *or* civilization. But philosopher Merab Mamardashvili authored the expression, which graces our programme: «many cultures, but only one civilization». The unusual phrase first

appeared in an interview of 1989.

The phrase was not accidental. While the Soviet Union was breaking up, free-thinking people reacted to the political turbulence. It was then that Merab Mamardashvili famously said at an international presentation in Paris: “You, people of the West, and we, coming from the East, stand in one and the same historical point... quite similar to the one where we found ourselves after the First and the Second World Wars... we are still confronted with the same danger and share the same responsibility”. “Europe has no age, it is constantly at birth. That is how we should consider its responsibilities.”

Let me also quote from the 1989 interview of M. Mamardashvili, entitled *Other Skies*: "I believe that contact between cultures is impossible. What I do call a contact, however, is what one may conventionally call civilization — not to make a disparaging distinction between civilization and culture. On the contrary, I suggest that there are many cultures, but only one civilization. The civilization represents contact. But in the strict sense no contact between cultures is possible. Especially this concerns cultures, which evolved far from the axis of the world religions".

Contact between cultures was not possible *in principle* before the Axial Age or Achsenzeit, as Karl Jaspers might have said, who introduced the term in his *Origin and Goal of History* to denote the period of ancient history during about the 8<sup>th</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC.

But why has contact been impossible *after* the Axial Age? It is because cultures *spark* at contact like wires under high voltage. Let us make a reservation; after the invention of electric current transformer and relay protection, wires stopped sparking, and the electrical equipment set to function properly.

By drawing such analogy I wish to say that contact between cultures



becomes possible with the advent of *social transformers*, if we cling to the term a little longer, which perform a *civilizing function*. By solving diverse problems in different historical times the Europeans (at least, the philosophers and the physicists among them) achieved identical results in industry and in the social field. They conjured up constructs, which allow projecting the natural light of reason and the artificial light, the machine-generated energy.

They say that human life is a mystery, and the key to it is to be found in the Axial Age, closely related to life of several personalities both in Europe and in Asia. In this age the world witnessed concurrent rise of person-centred moral teachings (Confucius and Lao-Tse in China), religions (prophets in Palestine, the Upanishads and Buddha in India) and schools of Greek philosophy. This was an age, Hanna Arendt writes in her essay *Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World*, when mythologies were repudiated or used as basis of great world religions with their notion of one transcendent God; when man became conscious of Being as a whole and of his own singularity compared to all other beings; when he experienced absoluteness in the face of selfhood, and began thinking about consciousness. In brief, people started to develop new, highly individualized aspects of life. How was it made possible?

It was made possible thanks to the discovered human ability to transcend one's natural, empirical state, to exceed one's bounds.

I am not referring here to a state of going "beside oneself", when man loses his mind; I am referring to that unconventional status when we permeate our natural constraints, while retaining mental lucidity. But whereto do we egress? The answer has been known from the Axial Age: the egress is towards God, the Good, the

Infinite, the Void. Different concepts were devised to describe this abstraction (empty set in mathematics, space in physics, and social space in social studies).

A contact or an act of understanding is exclusively personal. It embodies the civilizing principle, which is blocked by cultures for various reasons and through different means, as it happened, for instance, in the USSR, where the bol'sheviks were full of confidence that they could start writing history from scratch.

So what is it that makes people of differing beliefs, opinions and religions strive for implementing such abstract notions as public good, justice, freedom, and democracy?

One moving force is our consciousness of the imperfect human nature, susceptible to deception, envy, guile and violence. Another locomotive of change is our common sense and, with the intuitive sense of belonging to single human species, our hope to deter violence at times of crisis and conflict through personal and collective effort.

The truth is subject to communication. Or, the truth resides where one "self" relates to another "self" existentially, on the level of feelings. So even though the truth is not supported by anything, this does not mean that the truth does not unite people. Otherwise philosophers and theologians would not have written their treatises, and artists and poets would not have created works of perennial beauty. And supporters of differing "truths", people of various ethnic backgrounds would not have aspired to resolve conflicts, discussing problems of economics, environmental protection and health care at international conferences.

However daily life is remote from purely intelligible ideas. We speak a natural language, which invariably urges us to search for answers to questions,

which animate us in the realm of the perceived and not in the realm of the notional (where we understand what we perceive).

I emphasize this to return to Jaspers and remind ourselves that the concept of *communication* is central to his philosophy of history: in the sphere of *existential*, Jaspers maintains, *truth* and *communication* are identical. This leads me to a conclusion that *communication* posited by Jaspers and *contact* put forward by Mamardashvili refer to the same notion. The truth remains unperturbed, Mamardashvili said. The truth, he assumed, is not supported by anything, but it holds together everything else in the world. Specifically, the truth solders history in continuity, in history's civilizational, *conscious* aspect. This aspect is *conscious* in the sense that prefix *con-* in the word *consciousness* indicates a dimension of the invisible. Or, put otherwise, it indicates the relation of verbalized *knowledge* (from Latin *scio* — know) to an insightful state of being, which was causative in acquisition of this knowledge. Thus Russian word *soznanie* interlocks with *consciousness* in English and the Romance languages. There we discern a clear mark of some primary metaphysical act, which shapes human personality and, at the same time, isolates man as a unique moral phenomenon in ethics and culture. A moral act does not follow directly from the concept of morality, otherwise it would have been easy for people to act morally. However people act morally not because they correlate, in the moment of acting, the notions of *good* and *evil*, and resolve that good would certainly prevail. No, they act morally as does biblical Job. The notions of *good* and *conscious* are not determined by anything. That is why the knowledge of good is not transferrable in a mechanistic way, however often we repeat: "act according to conscience", "be truthful", "do not kill".

"I know that I know nothing" — so Socrates, himself a consummate master of grammar, logic and rhetoric, expressed his philosophical creed. Verily a drama

of human freedom consists in this intense desire (because the emphasis is on the first *know* of the statement) to hold on to something that opens up on the border of the unknown. This drama is played out in relation to every person's capabilities and efforts for a creative life. Through it he or she retains composure within the civilization, which inherited the spirit of antiquity and of the Christian religion.

Humankind is a collective mythological inertial body, which absorbs the flashes of history, Merab Mamardashvili once said. One should construe our acts of understanding as a moment of history, a personal contact. Through contact we enter history's continuity. A contact which transcends a long period of time is what we may call civilization.

Therefore spiritual and intellectual communication between people is inevitable. Civilization persists as a uniting force. Only through communication and civic self-consciousness we wake up to the civilized world or, in other words, to the civil society, which today is virtually free of borders. Or else these borders are becoming conventional thanks to the Internet and mass communications.

Civil society and civic nation, having emerged once in the form of social and cultural phenomena, as did empire in the past ages, continue to exist. In our time the idea of an "empire" subsists through science and business on the global scale. It is a natural process, not unlike the development of civil society. The problem of developing countries, including Russia, is to enter the global process of "translation" of the civics into the language of rational understanding of universal values and global interests.

This will be the focal theme of two following panel discussions.

*Translated from Russian by Mark Dadian*



## *Addendum*

**Globalization** — a general trend of contemporary development, causing eruptions of archaic forms and sentiments in societies which undergo modernization, surges of fundamentalism in religious cultures and a cult of national and cultural exceptionalism. Under these conditions an unmastered past threatens to become an option for the future.

To avoid this end it is not enough to react to the challenges and contradictions of globalization, but it is required to build moral and intellectual alternatives to the threats it harbours, in the framework of universal values and global interests.

### **On Values**

Value is not an objective property or quality of a thing, but a social meaning a person and society ascribe to it.

Values evolve in the framework of a community. One and the same value may be of primary importance to one person and only of secondary importance to another. A system and hierarchy of values lie in the basis of beliefs, principles and norms, which regulate the behaviour of a social subject. Values are related to traditions, culture and history, and so they are of a notably conservative nature. This in itself does not mean that values remain unchanged through time and developing social context.

## **On the Category of Universal Values**

Universal values represent an ideal of harmonious coexistence of people on the basis of solidarity, empathy, respect and trust. A search for this ideal is a process subdivided into stages, every one of which registers a degree of general conviction with respect to the significance, preference, necessity and desirability of the universals.

Universal values as an ideal and a process imply recognition of cultural diversity, that is to say concurrent existence of many distinct norms, traditions, preferences and the related rights of all social subjects.

The universals are a subject of dialogue and a result of compromise and joint work. They evolve and strengthen alongside rising awareness of our interdependence and of the necessity to ensure stable and peaceful development in the joint struggle against general challenges and threats.

Universal values presuppose that we as humans must abolish the false sense of moral superiority of one culture (and its inherent values) over other cultures and values.

## **Values and Interests**

Interest is a polysemic concept connected with the need to know something new about the object of interest and with the heightened attention towards this object.

It is evident that an area of congruous, common interests expands with the rise of interdependence between people. Today our common interests embrace issues of development, general security, exhaustibility of natural resources, environmental protection and global governance.

Economic and political interdependence induce Russia and the West to co-operate in many fields of common interest.

It is also to be recognized that contiguous development of common objectives, principles and norms depends on the measure of their appropriation in an *autochthonous culture* rather than on imposition from the outside.

In other words, the acceptance by the subjects of world politics of common value-driven interests and norms is inseparable from their aspiration for cultural identity. To a large degree this fact of acceptance is institutionalized in the UN, other international organizations and supranational institutions. In the meantime the states are increasingly relying on extrainstitutional policies, availing themselves of *soft power*, seeking to influence each other through private media, NGOs, networks and transnational movements.

Practice of world politics attests that common values may not be implemented through a unidirectional *transit*, through mere planting of standards. Furthermore, it is absurd to think that these may be implanted by force. In today's interdependent



world values can only take root through dialogue about globally important interests, multilateral discussions, compromise between cultures, and, importantly, through enlightenment and civic education.