

Imagining Inter-civilizational Dialogue from a European Perspective



**“Imagining Inter-civilizational Dialogue from a European Perspective” – notes for the
academic project 2025/2026 led by the Centre for Religion, Human Values, and
International Relations**

Rationale

If we fail to nurture our high-level political values and to think seriously about our “social imaginaries,”¹ the risk is that particular decisions will become “transactional”, contributing to a loss of public trust in politics.

In Europe, any effort to interpret high-level principles in the light of today’s circumstances and make them performative in the 21st century needs to take into account the same traditions of thought and the same depth of cultural sources (religious or not) on which we were able to draw in the post-war period. A further important parameter suggests itself. A century ago, following World War One, Rabindranath Tagore visited five continents in pursuit of his vision of unity in diversity within the human family, to be achieved through intercultural dialogue. In the present century, Cardinal Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI, stated the following in his dialogue with the philosopher Jürgen Habermas:²

If we are to discuss the basic questions of human existence today, the intercultural dimension seems to me absolutely essential – for such a discussion cannot be carried on exclusively either within the Christian realm or within the Western rational tradition ... De facto, they are obliged to acknowledge that they are accepted only by parts of mankind, and that they are comprehensible only in parts of mankind.

The project “Imagining Inter-civilizational Dialogue from a European Perspective” does not engage directly with the war in Ukraine or other conflicts. However, the “civilizational perspective” promoted by the present project and by other similar initiatives at the level of civil society can help create a more favourable context for peacebuilding efforts.

The emerging concept of civilizational diplomacy

The world faces a cascade of crises defying analysis and forecasting. States and other actors constantly increase their productive and technological capacity without there being an equivalent development in the realm of mutual understanding and governance. In many parts of the world, including of course the European region, we see conflict and polarization. As tech, trade (including tariffs and sanctions), finance, domestic economic policy, and military competition are interwoven in new ways, “geoeconomics” is an emerging discipline in many

¹ “Social imaginaries” – the shared beliefs, values, and understandings that create cohesion and a sense of community.

² Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization/On Reason and Religion*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2006

universities.³ The definition and measurement of economic growth has become a topic in its own right.⁴ The study of history – “periodisation”, theories of change – is an area of contestation.⁵ Predictions of an ever-worsening global disorder are published every day, and do not need to be summarised here.

At the heart of any new departure in a *pluralist global society* is the search for *shared social meaning* and *effective shared values*. The search for *effective shared values* is by definition an inter-civilizational, intercultural, and interfaith project, and can draw lessons from precedents such as the original Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and its matrix of ten principles; the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2001; and the UN Alliance of Civilizations promoted in 2005 by Spain and Türkiye⁶ and endorsed by the World Summit in that year.

A key premise of the present proposal is that a deeper dialogue on values can be taken forward separately from, and in parallel with, day-to-day politics and diplomacy. Our goal in “imagining inter-civilizational dialogue from a European perspective” is not to cancel older narratives or to replace existing structures. On the contrary, we are working towards an *additional investment in a new form* of diplomacy, in search of a bigger language and a more convincing narrative. Another way of putting this is that we seek to open the door to an *anthropological* approach to peacebuilding. We can study and understand the principles of benign political change; which means a fuller statement of the circumstances, better criteria of evaluation, and better modes of operation. A truth discerned in one situation can illuminate our consideration of others.

There are significant indications that governments, civil society, and faith communities are renewing their interest in a sustained dialogue on human values. On 7th June 2024, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution A/RES/78/286,⁷ declaring 10th June the International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations. The resolution emphasizes that all civilizational achievements constitute “the collective heritage of humankind.” It underscores the importance of respecting civilizational diversity and highlights “the crucial role of dialogue” in maintaining global peace, advancing shared development, enhancing human well-being, and achieving collective progress.

On 4th March 2025, the UN General Assembly named 28th January as the International Day of Peaceful Coexistence.⁸ On the same day, the General Assembly established an International Day of Hope, inviting Member States “to further amplify hope to help to ensure peace, well-being and sustainable development, including by working with communities and other relevant

³ “Welcome to the new age of geoeconomics,” Gillian Tett, Financial Times, 10 May/11 May 2025

⁴ Diane Coyle, 2025. *The Measure of Progress: Counting What Really Matters*, Princeton University Press

⁵ Oswyn Murray, *The Muse of History/The Ancient Greeks From the Enlightenment to the Present*. Allen Lane. 2024

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Alliance_of_Civilizations

⁷ <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/78/286>

⁸ ‘Education for Democracy, Agreement on Conservation of Marine Biological Diversity among Several Resolutions Adopted by General Assembly’, 4 March 2025, <https://press.un.org/en/2025/ga12676.doc.htm>

actors, through reconciliatory measures and acts of service, and by encouraging forgiveness and compassion among individuals.”

Speaking at the opening of the 10th Global Forum of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations in November 2024, UN Secretary-General António Guterres associated inter-civilizational dialogue with the values embedded in the Pact for the Future, adopted at the Summit of the Future (New York, September 2024) and in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.⁹

Pope Francis wrote to an Italian newspaper during his final serious illness (*Corriere della Sera*, 18 March 2025)¹⁰ asking us “to disarm our words in order to disarm our minds and disarm the earth” and proposing that religions (plural) can “draw on the spirituality of peoples to reignite the desire for fraternity and justice and the hope of peace.” The Holy See has called in the meantime for a new style of diplomacy based on the logic of encounter:

Blessed are those times and places, where people sit around the same table and place their trust in the power of reason and conscience.¹¹

On 16th May, in his address to members of the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See, Pope Leo stated that “there is a need to give new life to multilateral diplomacy.”¹² In the intervening months, Pope Leo and the Holy See have made many statements in support of effective multilateralism, disarmament, interfaith and intercultural dialogue, a strong climate agenda, and a strong North–South agenda:

A true ‘ecological debt’ exists, particularly between the global North and South, connected to commercial imbalances with effects on the environment and the disproportionate use of natural resources by certain countries over long periods of time.¹³

The General Secretary of CEC (Conference of European Churches), Rev. Frank-Dieter Fischbach, has suggested that “a new Helsinki Process could help Europe find its way forward – inclusive, just, and committed to human dignity.”¹⁴

⁹ <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2024-11-26/secretary-generals-remarks-the-opening-session-of-the-10th-united-nations-alliance-of-civilizations>

¹⁰ https://roma.corriere.it/notizie/politica/25_marzo_18/papa-francesco-lettera-corriere-esclusiva-4917a7c9-d4ce-448f-981d-36e9b79dextlk.shtml

¹¹ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2025-03/archbishop-gallagher-mass-ambassadors-pope-health.html>

¹² <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2025/may/documents/20250516-corpo-diplomatico.html>

¹³ Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Paul Gallagher at the General Debate of the High-Level Week at the Opening of the 80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (New York, 29 September 2025) <https://share.google/jYmOs3bhsp7w6zqa2>

¹⁴ <https://ceceurope.org/cec-general-secretary-reflects-on-peace-and-justice-at-helsinki-final-act-anniversary-conference>

In her last State of the Union address before the war in Ukraine (September 2021), the President of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, citing Vaclav Havel, described the European Union's values as having "come from the cultural, religious and humanist heritage of Europe."

In the European Union, the war in Ukraine is framed as the defence of an open society against authoritarianism; in Russia, the war is framed as a defence of "traditional values." Both narratives have a "civilisational" dimension.

Speaking at the Munich Security Conference on 14 February 2025, US Vice-President J.D. Vance called for a dialogue receptive to all points of view and capable of "taking our shared civilization in a new direction."¹⁵ Two influential figures in Silicon Valley argue as follows in a book just published:

We have grown too eager to banish any sentiment or expression of values from the public square ... We must now take seriously the possibility that it will be the resurrection of a shared culture, not its abandonment, that will make possible our continued survival and cohesion.¹⁶

In his book *Why Bharat Matters*, published in 2024, the Foreign Minister of India, S. Jaishankar, outlined his vision of India as a "civilizational state" combining cultural beliefs and a modernizing agenda.¹⁷

The Center for Shared Civilizational Values (CSCV), based in Jakarta, works to "preserve and strengthen a rules-based international order founded upon universal ethics and humanitarian values." The CSCV serves as the Permanent Secretariat of the G20 Religion Forum.

China was among the sponsors of the UN General Assembly resolution establishing the International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations. The *tian xia* (early Confucian) model for the formation of political entities/civilisations differs from western political conceptions such as the nation State. Chinese scholars argue that western liberalism can learn from Confucianism.¹⁸ Of immediate relevance to the present project is the roadmap for a dialogue among civilisations set out on 10th June 2025 by the senior office-holder Wang Yi.¹⁹

¹⁵ Though it should be noted that the US did not vote in favour of establishing the International Day of Peaceful Coexistence.

¹⁶ Alexander C. Karp and Nicholas W. Zamiska, *The Technological Republic/Hard Power, Soft Belief, and the Future of the West*. Penguin Random House, 2025, p. 73, p. 216

¹⁷ The motto of India's G20 Presidency in 2023 was 'One Earth, One Family, One Future.'

¹⁸ Chan, J. (2014). *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times*. Princeton. See also the work of Professor Tongdong Bai of Fudan University in China who is also a member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences

¹⁹ Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee. Wang Yi's video address can be found at www.fmprc.gov.cn

In the sphere of international relations as an academic discipline, Mai'a Davis Cross of Northeastern University, drawing on neuroscience, anthropology, and evolutionary biology, challenges the direction taken by scholarship over the last century.²⁰

The search for a civilizational step-change to be achieved through a multi-stakeholder dialogue on a broad agenda was the vision of the 17th century Moravian thinker Comenius. Following the Thirty Years War, Comenius proposed a *consultatio catholica*, a comprehensive Europe-wide deliberation about our shared future. Comenius formed an overview of the several different poles of tension in Europe, envisaged new processes and institutions, and sought to place the different spheres of knowledge at the service of the common good.

The premise of the Centre for Religion, Human Values, and International Relations is that the missing ingredient in global politics is a sense of the holy. A sense of the holy enables us to intuit complexity, to engage effectively with traditions other than our own, and to envision a future that is not visible in the alternatives of the present. The project “Imagining Inter-civilisational Dialogue” can be envisioned as a contribution from civil society to the inter-civilizational, intercultural, and interfaith dialogue promoted by the UN. The project would aim to bring the European, West Asian, South Asian, North American, and African perspectives closer together. Insights achieved in 2025/2026 “from a European perspective” can lead to a more effective dialogue with others in the years ahead.

Defining civilization

In 2008, UNESCO's document setting out guidelines for a dialogue of civilisations describes civilisation as “a universal, plural and non-hierarchical phenomenon.” Civilizations are inherently intercultural.²² Romila Thapar's account of Indian and South Asian history emphasises diversity and the role of dissent in enabling civilizational transformation. Thapar insists that civilisations can no longer be seen as walled off from one another and self-sufficient:

Knowledge systems that have governed world history have no single source. Thus, the direction taken by mathematics, astronomy, and medicine evolved from an intersection of ideas that were Chinese, Indian, Greek, and Arab, and these were developed further in Europe.²³

Romila Thapar's understanding of civilization is consonant with the preambular language of resolution A/RES/78/286 of June 2024, referred to above:

²⁰ Mai'a K. Davis Cross, *International Cooperation Against All Odds/The Ultrasocial World*. Oxford University Press. 2024

²² <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000159171>

²³ Thapar, R. (2008). *Humanities in a Globalising World*. Speech on the presentation of the 2008 Kluge Prize, Library of Congress

Recognizing that civilizations and cultures take diverse forms across time and space and flourish in contact with others ...

Thematic focus

Six considerations can help to shape the thematic focus of the project “Imagining Inter-civilizational Dialogue from a European Perspective.”

First, we should continue to study the lessons of the pandemic. The pandemic saw many examples of dedication to duty on the part of key workers, effective government intervention, and solidarity in civic society. An open question is whether the same sense of community animated relationships at the global level. In some societies there has been a pushback against the top-down forms of leadership that appeared necessary during the pandemic.

Second, at the present historical moment, with so much uncertainty about the future, we need to pay particular attention to methodology and process, including new forms of multi-stakeholder engagement.

Third, this includes a willingness to engage in genuine interpersonal dialogue or encounter, even across political, religious, belief, and cultural boundaries.

Fourth, good governance relies on widespread trust, shared values and understandings, and other conditions that governments cannot guarantee merely by “constitutive” decisions within the political process itself.

Fifth, as we reason together, a particular aim should be to capture the imagination and contribution of young people. This will mean engaging with youth representatives, including figures from the world of culture.

Sixth, the nominees of religious and belief traditions should be included in long-term thinking of the kind we are proposing.²⁴ The project will engage inclusively with the diversity of traditions, bearing in mind that religions are powerful sources of the “social imaginaries” referred to above. These deep cultural sources should be actively drawn upon to help navigate the uncertainties of the present time.

Following from the rationale stated above, and these six considerations, the project “Imagining Inter-civilisational Dialogue” could aim, subject to further discussion, at clarifying five broad questions and a similar number of specific topics over an approximately fifteen month period.

The following are examples of “broad questions”:

²⁴ UN agencies call for due diligence to ensure that the relevant stakeholders are included in multi-stakeholder dialogue processes.

1. What are the arguments in favour of inter-civilizational, intercultural, and interfaith dialogue as an enterprise distinct from day-to-day negotiations on specific subjects?
2. What concepts, values, and organisational principles should underpin new spaces or assemblies within which different stakeholders reflect on the medium-term future in the light of high-level values?
3. Is it possible to refine a series of structural questions that arise independently of any one religious or philosophical tradition?
4. In future “spaces of shared projection,”²⁵ what should be the initial agenda and at what diplomatic “product” should we aim?
5. What are the social, political, and security implications of the continuing rapid development of AI, quantum, and other technologies?

Similarly, the specific topics to be explored are for discussion and will depend on the current interests and priorities of participants in our group. Based on preparations and discussions to date, at least some of the following topics might be addressed:

- i. Polarisation and its antidotes
- ii. Food, food production, food sovereignty and related issues
- iii. The jurisprudence governing the uses of outer space
- iv. Paradigms of security (deterrence versus “comprehensive” or “indivisible” security)
- v. The meaning of citizenship
- vi. Nature, climate, and spirituality
- vii. Interfaith dialogue and public engagement
- viii. The perspective of indigenous peoples
- ix. The state of multilateralism (a mapping exercise)
- x. The future of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)

²⁵ As described by Jonathan White, *In the Long Run/The Future as a Political Idea*, Profile Books, London, 2024

In her essay “The Power of Words,”²⁶ Simone Weil writes:

Once all the real data of a problem have been revealed, the problem is well on the way to solution. The problem of peace, both international and social, has never been completely stated.

A theme to be pursued through all research questions is that our dominant narratives or orthodoxies risk being “incomplete”. We sometimes conceal from ourselves the full implications of our policies and actions and fail to perceive alternative good options that are available. A fuller statement of the “real data” of our political and economic situation can point us towards a new style of diplomacy.

Identifying structural questions

Inter-civilizational dialogue can help us to identify the “structural questions” and “fundamental words”²⁸ that need to be examined carefully if we are to make more complete sense of our co-existence.

In anthropological or civilisational terms, our most urgent task is to affirm *the possibility of an effective public truth*, as stated above. In a pluralist global society, we need to embrace the commonality underlying our differences (important and inevitable as these differences are); to frame our differences in such a way that we continue to understand one another; and to see ourselves at some level as companions on a shared journey.

The conversation about the future can begin with a series of structural questions that arise independently of any one religious or philosophical tradition. A contemporary authority on the Chinese tradition states that Chinese thinkers will need to “justify Confucian values in terms that do not require prior acceptance of Confucianism.”²⁹ None of us can expect everyone else to embrace our own priorities, or our own worldview, as the price of entering the conversation.

On the assumption that an important step in inter-civilizational dialogue is to refine the structural questions that we intend to address together, the following questions are put forward as a starting point for discussion:

- To what extent have civilisations depended on a sense of the holy?
- Is there always an element of “givenness” in human creativity and happiness?
- Is human life significant even though our earth is finite?

²⁶ The essay was written during the Spanish Civil War and is available in several anthologies including Simone Weil, *The Power of Words* (Penguin 2020)

²⁸ “Structural questions” are discussed in a co-authored book, McDonagh et al., *On the Significance of Religion for Global Diplomacy*. Routledge, 2021, p. 21 -38.

²⁹ Chan, J. (2014). *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times*, cited above.

- Can it be said that dialogue and communication constitute the first principle of action – because to challenge this starting point is to find oneself back again in dialogue and communication?
- Is there a common life or collective well-being that is more than the sum of our private interests?
- Is exploration and discovery the essence of human identity or is there a point at which stability and sharing should come first?
- Are human beings entitled to a moral relationship with things, and how is such a right to be reconciled with wholesale private ownership of the means of production?
- How does a political dispensation based on coercion become a dispensation based on freely given consent?

Situational awareness

The project will maintain “situational awareness” of conferences, initiatives, and publications having a potential impact on our research, such as the Second World Summit for Social Development (Qatar, November) and COP 30 in November, in Belém in the Amazon.

In March 2025, the U.N. Secretary-General launched a new initiative to reform the United Nations as it approaches its 80th anniversary this year. The premise is that the UN urgently needs to address major funding reductions and to find ways of tackling severe global challenges. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group have launched a consultation tasked with developing a long-term view on the future of the world economy, international cooperation, and the roles of the Bank and the Fund. The report of this consultation is expected to be published by end-2025. Intergovernmental consultations are likely to begin over the next few years on the post-2030 renewal of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

In principle, a ceasefire in the war in Ukraine may open the door to a mandated UN or OSCE mission and to a revival of the OSCE as a “space of shared projection” within which to enable a wide range of parties and stakeholders to reflect on the medium-term future.

Finally, it will be helpful to explore the potential complementarity between the present initiative and the so-call “Article 17 dialogue” as it is currently being developed in the European Union by the Commission and the European Parliament.³⁰

³⁰ Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union provides as follows:

- 1) The Union respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of churches and religious associations or communities in the Member States.
- 2) The Union equally respects the status under national law of philosophical and non-confessional organisations.
- 3) Recognising their identity and their specific contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organisations.

The potential of the OSCE

In 2018, the OSCE Academic Network published a report “Religion and Security – Building in the OSCE Context/Involving Religious Leaders and Congregations in Joint Efforts.” The project “Imagining Inter-civilizational Dialogue from a European Perspective” can draw on that report, taking into account global developments in the meantime.

The Helsinki Final Act speaks of “cooperating in the interest of mankind.” The rationale of the present project implies that there is a potential read across from the OSCE region to developments at the global level and vice-versa. The OSCE – given its broad agenda, flexibility, geographical scope, and values-led approach to international relations – has the potential to become an acknowledged standard-bearer for comprehensive approaches to peace-building.

The challenge of re-imagining the OSCE in its regional and global context has been acknowledged at least since the 2004 Ministerial Council. Decision MC.DEC/16/04 established the panel of eminent persons which reported in 2005.³¹ A further panel of eminent persons reported in November 2015.³² The Ministerial Council decision (MC.DEC/2/21) providing for Finland to exercise the chairmanship in 2025, the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, was a signal that the participating States remained committed at that time (in the words of Finland’s President Niinistö, speaking on 22 November 2021) to “the letter, the model, and the spirit of Helsinki.” President Niinistö, in the same speech, drew attention to the potential significance of the OSCE in the broad international context: “We are looking at ways to combine the Helsinki Spirit approach with the Our Common Agenda process at the United Nations.”

The 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act coincides with the 75th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration. Robert Schuman believed that “the peace of the world cannot be maintained without creative efforts commensurate with the scale of the threat.” The project “Imagining Inter-civilizational Dialogue from a European Perspective,” as well as engaging with the “Helsinki spirit,” reflects the vision of the European Union’s founding fathers.

Capacity for success

The Centre for Religion, Human Values, and International Relations has a proven capacity to support projects of engaged research. Over the past two years, the Centre’s multi-stakeholder projects have addressed the future of Europe, the post-COVID economy, resilience in global food systems, comparative peace processes, and (under EU auspices) the ethics of AI. The Centre is also responsible for a project in Malawi on diversifying food production with the

³¹ “Common Purpose: Towards a more effective OSCE”

³² “Back To Diplomacy: Final Report and Recommendations of the Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security as a Common Project, November 2015”

active involvement of faith leaders. Underpinning the work of the Centre for Religion, Human Values, and International Relations is the co-authored book *On the Significance of Religion for Global Diplomacy*.³³

Work programme and outputs

The project will be developed through a combination of methods. As a first step, we are in the course of identifying a core team of around fifteen participants from different generations and backgrounds. The core values that come to mind in assembling our team are hospitality, social friendship, and the quality of our future report as one contribution among others to a debate on the revival of multilateral diplomacy.

We envisage three plenary workshops, in Dublin (Albert College) on 27th-28th November 2025; in Barcelona (Recinte Modernista de Sant Pau) in May 2026; and a concluding meeting close to the end of the Swiss OSCE Chairmanship in 2026, at a venue to be decided, ideally in Vienna. Other elements in the project will include face-to-face meetings of principal stakeholders; on-line or in person working groups; and specially commissioned academic research. We could envisage a public event to present our conclusions to coincide with the International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations on Thursday 10th June 2027.

The conclusions of the project “Imagining Inter-civilisational Dialogue” will take the form of a “learning brief” (short summary) as well as a fuller well-designed report for publication. The dissemination strategy in 2027 might include, for example, a short documentary film, a website or substack, an information strategy undertaken with the help of faith communities, and presentations in appropriate fora including at meetings with public authorities in and beyond Europe.

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³³ Cited above in the section on structural questions