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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Towards a post-imperial and Global IR?: Revisiting Khatami's Dialogue among Civilisations

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Abstract

This article argues that Dialogue among Civilisations can be put forward as a crucial contribution to debates addressing IR's Eurocentrism. It highlights the blurring of West/non-West, domestic/international, and imperial/post-imperial bifurcations. This is evident in three ways. First, Dialogue among Civilisations needs to be appreciated in Iran's wider historical context and its multifaceted intellectual heritages. This demonstrates that the idea of the West as distinctly different from the East is problematic because of engagement between Iran and the so-called West. Second, Khatami's intellectual endeavours are based on a simultaneous engagement with Western political thought, Islamic philosophy, and the idea of Ancient Iran. Finally, the notion itself reflects an internal dialogue whereby Western civilisation along with Islam and Iran's pre-Islamic heritages are considered integral to Iranian political culture. Furthermore, it is an aspiration for how post-colonial Muslim societies can engage with colonial power while maintaining a post-colonial authenticity. Our contention is that an in-depth understanding of Iran alongside a revisiting of Khatami's Dialogue among Civilisations can act as a means of bringing the perspective of the 'other' into debates on the international and our epistemological and ontological understanding of the West.

Keywords: civilisation; Dialogue among Civilisations; Global IR; Iran; post-colonial

Introduction

In 1997, at the Tehran Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) summit, the Islamic Republic of Iran's president at the time, Mohammad Khatami, first put forward the idea of Dialogue among Civilisations to an international audience. Khatami and others around him saw the concept as an antithesis to Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations',¹ as well as challenging the perceived liberal victory encapsulated by Francis Fukuyama's *End of History*.² The concept went on to find its most successful reception, and application, within the multilateral framework provided by the United Nations (UN) with Khatami's well-publicised speech at the 1998 General Assembly. The designation thereafter of 2001 as the UN 'Year of Dialogue among Civilizations' was an important juncture in the idea gaining traction in what Homeira Moshirzadeh defines as a sphere of 'international public debate'.³

¹Samuel Huntington, 'The clash of civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs*, 72:3 (1993), pp. 22–49.

²Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992).

³Homeira Moshirzadeh, 'Critical international theory and Dialogue of Civilisations', in Fred Dallmayr and Abbas Manoochehri (eds), *Civilisational Dialogue and Political Thought: Tehran Papers* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007), pp. 101–18.

Our contention is that Dialogue among Civilisations is an excellent case that problematises the West/non-West bifurcation in, and is consequently a crucial contribution to, debates addressing Eurocentrism in International Relations (IR). One aspect of this debate is how the so-called non-West⁴ can be integral to the discipline. This is in relation to: scholars outside Anglophone academia and empirical research from and on the Global South; non-Western theoretical approaches;⁵ and an appreciation of non-Western agency,⁶ including post-colonial agency in constructing and/or reconstituting the international.⁷ While there have been attempts to include the non-West, the usefulness of West/non-West, North/South, First World/Third World, and East/West binary categorisations to a non-Eurocentric IR has been debated, to be discussed below.

We contend that, despite the legacy of epistemic mapping (addressed below) evident in Dialogue among Civilisations, the blurring of West and non-West is evident in Dialogue among Civilisations in three ways. First, Dialogue among Civilisations needs to be appreciated in Iran's wider historical context and its multifaceted intellectual heritages, which are themselves interconnected. This context demonstrates that the idea of the West as distinctly different from the East is problematic because of engagement between Iran and the so-called West. Second, Khatami's intellectual endeavours are embedded in Iran's multiple heritages and based on a simultaneous engagement with Western political thought, Islamic philosophy, and the idea of Ancient Iran. Finally, the notion of Dialogue among Civilisations itself reflects an internal dialogue whereby what Khatami considers Western civilisation along with Islam and Iran's pre-Islamic heritages are considered *integral* to Iranian political culture. Furthermore, for Khatami, it is an aspiration for how post-colonial Muslim societies can engage with colonial power while maintaining a post-colonial authenticity. Consequently, the case of Iran highlights not only the need to appreciate the legacy of bodies of knowledge that pre-date European imperialism and colonialism, but also that not all states or societies have the same relationship with European imperialism and colonialism.⁸

Our efforts to recast Khatami's political thought in light of developments in Global IR also require us to reflect on our own academic endeavours. While remaining cognisant of our own positionality as scholars involved in knowledge production in Europe, we have repositioned Khatami's political thought, articulated in the main through Dialogue among Civilisations. Our exploration is rooted in our own 'Area Studies' background, which is grounded in empirical knowledge.

⁴John Hobson, 'Towards a post-racist critical IR', *Review of International Studies*, 33:1 (2007), pp. 91–116 (p. 94) provides a useful explanation of the labels 'West' and 'non-West'. This idea of 'West' is based on European thinkers in the eighteenth and nineteenth century who constructed a European identity based on an 'elevated Western Self' and a 'demoted' Eastern Other. 'By the early nineteenth century Romantic thinkers then extrapolated this conception' to Ancient Greece. The result of this was that East and West were no longer considered interlinked.

⁵See, for example, Amitav Acharya, 'Global International Relations (IR) and regional worlds', *International Studies Quarterly*, 58 (2014), pp. 647–59; Pinar Bilgin, 'How to remedy Eurocentrism in IR? A complement and a challenge for *The Global Transformation*', *International Theory*, 8:3 (2016), pp. 492–501; Pinar Bilgin, "'Contrapuntal reading" as a method, an ethos, and a metaphor for Global IR', *International Studies Review*, 18:1 (2016), pp. 134–46; Pinar Bilgin, "Thinking past "Western" IR?", *Third World Quarterly*, 29:1 (2008), pp. 5–23; Arlene B. Tickner and David L. Blaney, 'Introduction: Claiming the international beyond IR', in Arlene B. Tickner and David L. Blaney (eds), *Claiming the International* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 1–24; Arlene B. Tickner, 'Core, periphery and (neo)imperialist International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:3 (2013), pp. 627–46; Ole Wæver and Arlene B. Tickner 'Geocultural epistemologies', in Arlene B. Tickner and Ole Wæver (eds), *International Relations Scholarship around the World: Worlding beyond the West* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 1–31.

⁶Hobson, 'Towards a post-racist critical IR'; Acharya, 'Global International Relations'.

⁷Vivienne Jabri, 'Disarming norms: Postcolonial agency and the constitution of the international', *International Theory*, 6:2 (2014), pp. 372–90.

⁸It should be noted that while Iran has never been formally colonised, it has been occupied by Russia and the UK and has had British and US interference in its affairs. Furthermore, as Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet and Robert Steele, 'Introduction: Iran and global decolonisation', in Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet and Robert Steele (eds), *Iran and Decolonisation* (London: Gingko, 2023), pp. 1–28, highlight, debates about colonial resistance and violence influence Iran's intellectual circles while also dealing with the legacy of imperialism and occupation. Furthermore, the Pahlavi state adopted 'some of the language of decolonisation'.

Consequently, this has enabled an analysis that attempts to go past the othering that is so often implicit in analyses of Iran as both an international actor and an 'object' of study.

This article builds on two bodies of scholarship. First, it builds on existing IR debates about the West/non-West bifurcation,⁹ and specifically Moshirzadeh's contention that Dialogue among Civilisations is a framework for dialogue between the 'core' and 'periphery' towards a more inclusive IR.¹⁰ We take Moshirzadeh's call seriously and build on it by offering a contextualised rereading of Khatami's own calls for dialogue in the light of Iran's complex political development and international relations, which illustrates how the so-called periphery is in fact constitutive of the international. Through the idea of Dialogue among Civilisations and the Iranian case, the article provides an important empirical example that challenges the very idea of what constitutes West and non-West as well as the blurring between the West and non-West. Second, we build on Dialogue among Civilisations scholarship by highlighting the concept's epistemological and ontological significance. This includes its relationship to debates on how world order should be understood,¹¹ to international theory and political thought,¹² and in terms of Khatami's foreign policy.¹³

The article starts by positioning our contribution in relation to debates regarding Global IR and the necessary epistemological and ontological framework to challenge IR's Eurocentrism. It then presents Dialogue among Civilisations within the context of Iran's multiple intellectual heritages and multifaceted historical and political development. It subsequently explores the genealogy and intellectual development of the work of Khatami and others on Dialogue among Civilisations, highlighting Khatami's agency to engage with, critique, and co-opt multiple 'bodies of knowledge'. The final section shows how Khatami's thoughts and writings on civilisation, culture, tradition, and modernity as part of Dialogue among Civilisations provides an epistemological and ontological challenge to West/non-West dichotomisation.

Towards a post-imperial and Global IR?

It is broadly accepted that IR has Eurocentric roots, and for many Eurocentrism continues. This can be attributed to its 'lack of "openness"' towards the 'international',¹⁴ a 'geo-cultural division of

⁹See Roxanne Lynn Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Kimberley Hutchings, 'Dialogue between whom? The role of the West/non-West distinction in promoting global dialogue in IR', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39:3 (2011), pp. 639–47; Christopher Murray, 'Imperial dialectics and epistemic mapping: From decolonisation to anti-Eurocentric IR', *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:2 (2020), pp. 419–42; Bilgin, 'Thinking past "Western" IR?'; Robbie Shilliam, 'The perilous but unavoidable terrain of the non-West', in Robbie Shilliam (ed.), *International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism and Investigations of Global Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 12–26; Audrey Alejandro, 'Diversity for and by whom? Knowledge production and the management of diversity in international relations', *International Politics Review*, 9:2 (2021), pp. 280–5.

¹⁰Homeira Moshirzadeh, 'The idea of Dialogue of Civilizations and core-periphery dialogue in International Relations', *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace*, 9:2 (2020), pp. 211–28.

¹¹See Fabio Petito, 'Dialogue of Civilizations as an alternative model for world order', in Michalis S. Michael and Fabio Petito (eds), *Civilizational Dialogue and World Order: The Other Politics of Cultures, Religions, and Civilizations in International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 47–67; Fabio Petito, 'Dialogue of civilizations in a multipolar world: Toward a multicivilizational-multiplex world order', *International Studies Review*, 18:1 (2016), pp. 78–91.

¹²Hadi Khaniki, 'Dialogue of Civilisations: Objective grounds and theoretical guidelines', in Fred Dallmayr and Abbas Manoochehri (eds), *Civilisational Dialogue and Political Thought: Tehran Papers* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007), pp. 83–100; Fabio Petito, 'Khatami's Dialogue among Civilisations as international political theory', in Dallmayr and Manoochehri (eds), *Civilisational Dialogue and Political Thought*, pp. 161–81; Hossein Seifzadeh, 'Cooperation within global civilisations and coexistence of diverse cultures', *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, 3:1 (2001), pp. 43–60; Homeira Moshirzadeh, 'goftegu-ye tamadonha az manzar-e saz-e engari', *majale-ye dāneshkadeh-ye hoquq va olum-e siyāsi*, 63:519 (1383 [2004]), pp. 169–201.

¹³Kayhan Barzegar, 'Khatamism: A new political symbolism in International Relations', *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, 3:2 (2001), pp. 23–46; Ghoncheh Tazmini, *Khatami's Iran: The Islamic Republic and the Turbulent Path to Reform* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009); Edward Wastnidge, *Diplomacy and Reform in Iran: Foreign Policy under Khatami* (London: IB Tauris, 2016).

¹⁴Bilgin, "Contrapuntal reading", p. 136.

knowledge production' based on a 'modern West versus traditional non-West',¹⁵ and a reluctance to move 'beyond' disciplinary boundaries.¹⁶ How the discipline should move away from its Eurocentric roots continues to be debated. As noted above, one part of the debate is how IR should deal with the categorisation of West and non-West and the knowledge on which these categorisations are based.

An influential intervention in this regard is the Global IR project. For Amitav Acharya, Global IR aims to transcend the West/non-West, 'or any similar binary and mutually exclusive categories', towards 'greater inclusiveness and diversity'. He argues that 'while these categories might persist as terms of convenience', the aspiration is that they 'lose analytical significance in the world of Global IR'.¹⁷ Crucially, the project was put forward in Acharya's capacity as the president of the International Studies Association, demonstrating legitimate leadership of the IR community. However, the West/non-West bifurcation as a means of addressing Eurocentrism has been critiqued for reinforcing 'the predominant binary hierarchy'.¹⁸ Furthermore, in attempting to bring about 'the "geo-cultural" dream of "Global IR"', different existing forms of writing and publishing IR have been delegitimised.¹⁹ Consequently, anti-Eurocentric critical discourses reproduce the very Eurocentrism they seek to criticise, which is further enabled through 'discriminative practices' such as gatekeeping.²⁰ Nevertheless, Global IR differs from other critiques because it provides practical steps to address Eurocentrism. For Acharya, creating a Global IR involves grounding IR 'in world history, not just Greco-Roman, European, or US history'; integrating area studies; and recognising 'multiple forms of agency beyond material power'.²¹

Christopher Murray critiques Global IR for its failure to address IR's Eurocentrism because it reproduces 'a hierarchical imperial imaginary' based on a 'divided image of the world' and 'essentialised constructions of ethnic and cultural difference' that are evident in the West/non-West categorisations.²² Murray's contention, therefore, is that if IR wishes to be global, it also needs to be post-imperial by using the label anti-colonial as opposed to non-Western. Drawing on Franz Fanon, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Edward Said, Murray argues that IR needs to highlight and engage with epistemic mapping.²³ This is the process of claiming 'ownership or close association between particular ways of thinking, seeing or knowing the world with particular imagined communities, or social identities and subjectivities', which is then institutionalised. Epistemic mapping is also the process of assuming that 'different ideas, practices or thought systems have a single geographical provenance'.²⁴ Such epistemic mapping is the construction of Europe, or the West, in terms of 'material success, scientific discovery, democracy and secular rationalism',²⁵ and as universalist; and 'non-Westerners' as 'in need of intervention'.²⁶ Furthermore, echoing earlier interventions highlighting the importance of history in IR and relational approaches,²⁷ Murray argues that

¹⁵ Shilliam, 'Perilous but unavoidable', p. 13.

¹⁶ Tickner, 'Core, periphery and (neo)imperialist International Relations'.

¹⁷ Acharya, 'Global International Relations', p. 649.

¹⁸ Hutchings, 'Dialogue between whom?', p. 645.

¹⁹ Alejandro, 'Diversity for and by whom?', p. 283.

²⁰ Audrey Alejandro, *Western Dominance in International Relations? The Internationalisation of IR in Brazil and India* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

²¹ Acharya, 'Global International Relations', p. 649.

²² Murray, 'Imperial dialectics and epistemic mapping', p. 420.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 421.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 424.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 430.

²⁷ See John Hobson, 'What's at stake in "bringing historical sociology back into international relations"?', in Stephen Hobden and John Hobson (eds), *Historical Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 3–31; Julian Go and George Lawson (eds), *Global Historical Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Peter Katzenstein, 'The second coming? Reflections on a global theory of International Relations', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 11:4 (2018), pp. 373–90.

'representations of the Western and non-Western' are 'co-constituted, subject to social and political relations, which are multiaxial, and are strongly determined by historical development'.²⁸

We find Pinar Bilgin's interventions on the issue of West/non-West bifurcation to be particularly pertinent because of her approach to spatiality and epistemology. This approach suggests that the boundaries between the West and non-West are blurred. Bilgin encourages IR to examine the extent to which 'Western' IR is actually Western, and the extent to which 'others' are distinct from the 'West'. This is because, 'there may be elements of "non-Western" experiences and ideas built into those ostensibly "Western" approaches to the study of world politics.' Furthermore, what are considered to be non-Western 'approaches to world politics may be suffused with "Western" concepts and theories'.²⁹ In her endeavour to address the fluidity between the West and non-West, or 'other', Bilgin calls for a closer examination of how the 'other' constitutes the international. She asserts that historical, intellectual, and socio-political context is absolutely essential for a non-Eurocentric IR.³⁰ Through engaging with and critiquing Barry Buzan and George Lawson's *The Global Transformation*,³¹ Bilgin examines how the 'other' constitutes the international with a close reading of Ottoman history. In so doing, she interrogates the Ottoman Empire's relationship with 'modernity' from a 19th-century Ottoman perspective.³²

Bilgin also addresses the agency of the 'other', or 'periphery'. She contends that the so-called periphery is not simply a periphery, but rather a 'constitutive outside' whose 'insights, interventions, experiences and inputs' have not been acknowledged in the prevalent arena.³³ Echoing Bilgin, the fluidity and complexity of such boundary making also has important corollaries for what Audrey Alejandro describes as 'diversity management' in the discipline of IR. Alejandro highlights how pervading Eurocentrism in IR means that Western scholars simultaneously keep IR's 'geo-cultural' diversity at bay while also acting as the discipline's 'saviours' in enabling 'geo-cultural' diversity to thrive. The impact of this is that they remain as the primary agents of IR diversity management.³⁴

Murray's call for an appreciation of epistemic mapping and assuming that 'different ideas, practices or thought systems have a single geographical provenance'³⁵ echoes Bilgin's scholarship. However, our contention is that Murray's call for post-imperial or anti-colonial in place of non-Western maintains similar boundaries to the West/non-West bifurcation. We accept Murray's contention that representations of Western and non-Western are relational and co-constituted, and that the legacy of European imperial knowledge, or indeed as Robbie Shilliam puts it, 'geo-cultural division of knowledge production',³⁶ needs to be highlighted. However, in framing 'European colonialisms and their postcolonial manifestations as the catch-all variable that determine IR's level of diversity', there is a risk of further homogenising the discipline by only legitimising particular ways of diversifying IR.³⁷ Furthermore, the notion of a post-imperial IR assumes, perhaps inadvertently, that all post-colonial societies have the same experience and dynamics, and that all non-Western societies have the same relationship with European colonialism. The idea of a post-imperial IR, therefore, creates new static boundaries, bifurcations, and binaries between 'imperial' and 'post-imperial'. Subsequently, there is a danger of assuming that these are neat periods of history and that

²⁸ Murray, 'Imperial dialectics and epistemic mapping', p. 421.

²⁹ Bilgin, 'Thinking past "Western" IR?', p. 5.

³⁰ See Bilgin, "Contrapuntal reading" and Bilgin, 'How to remedy Eurocentrism in IR?'

³¹ Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

³² Bilgin, 'How to remedy Eurocentrism in IR?'

³³ Pinar Bilgin, 'How not to globalise IR: "Centre" and "periphery" as constitutive of "the international"', *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, 18:70 (2021), pp. 1–15 (pp. 9–12).

³⁴ Alejandro, 'Diversity for and by whom?', p. 282.

³⁵ Murray, 'Imperial dialectics and epistemic mapping', p. 442.

³⁶ Shilliam, 'Perilous but unavoidable'.

³⁷ Alejandro, 'Diversity for and by whom?'

bodies of knowledge associated with them are devoid of influence from other parts of the world or indeed other periods in history.

Indeed, as John Hobson has illustrated, ‘the West and East have been consistently linked through globalization ever since 500 C.E., and the ideas of the European Enlightenment were built on Islamic thought and scientific developments.’³⁸ Furthermore, as Ali Ansari highlights, a ‘rediscovery’ of Zoroaster, or Zarathustra, in the late 18th and 19th centuries by European intellectuals contributed to a critique of Christian orthodoxy and a means of encouraging secularism. In addition to this, ‘Western historians went in search of a “Persia” which was very much a part of *their* narrative of descent’ because the Persians had played a pivotal role ‘in the Biblical narrative’ and were considered ‘part of the Western foundational myth’; Ancient Iran, or Persia, would come to be seen as *integral* to the ‘West’ because of its relationship with the Bible.³⁹ Regarding the complexity of colonialism, through a detailed analysis of India’s relationship with it, Ashis Nandy draws attention to the complexity of engaging or disengaging with colonialism.⁴⁰ He demonstrates how the colonial experience does not necessarily create political culture and political projects that are based on rigid boundaries between the coloniser and colonised. Rather, there are projects that engage with colonialism critically towards an authentic post-colonial consciousness.⁴¹ Furthermore, he contends that the impact of colonialism also influences the coloniser.⁴² Thus, imperial and post-imperial are also co-constituted. What is associated with European imperialism, or ‘imperial’, is already diffused and complex. Furthermore, the post-colonial coloniser can also be suffused with ideas associated with the colonised.

Additionally, we need to be careful to not brush over legacies of knowledge that pre-date European colonialism and influences on European imperial knowledge, as this can also lead to assumptions and essentialisation. For instance, Iran’s case shows that what is considered West and non-West is fluid. How the West is understood in relation to Iran historically by Europeans is subject to a process of reconstruction. Furthermore, the legacy of Ancient Iran is integral to Khatami’s political thought, and ‘Western civilisation’ is seen as *part* of Iran’s political culture because of the legacy of colonialism. Indeed, just as Nandy argued that ‘India is not non-West; it is India,’⁴³ Iran is not non-West, it is Iran.

While being cognisant of Murray’s concerns regarding the Global IR project and the risk of maintaining the West/non-West bifurcation, we argue that Acharya’s Global IR project remains a useful epistemological and ontological framework for addressing IR’s Eurocentricity because it has *legitimised* voices, actors, and histories on the periphery by acknowledging their relevance and highlighting their agency. After all it is not just the ‘West’ that acts, or indeed thinks. Focus on agency also legitimises the agency to engage with ideas regardless of their intellectual heritage. It is necessary to appreciate the agency of all to negotiate, reconstruct, and use bodies of knowledge regardless of whether at some point they have been, or are, considered Western or non-Western. Thus, the epistemology and ontology of Global IR allows for the inclusion of subject matter, approaches, and subjectivities that would have often previously been excluded because they are now considered legitimate. Indeed, it allows the ‘periphery’ to be recognised as a ‘constitutive outside.’ Peter Katzenstein argues that IR is in ‘the midst of generating new knowledge and theories that all IR scholars will use to better understand a global world that resists understanding in terms of black and white distinctions.’⁴⁴ By legitimising the inclusion of the ‘other’, Global IR has created

³⁸ John Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 2, 177–81.

³⁹ Ali Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 14–15, 16, emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford India Paperbacks, 2009).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 26–9.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 32–3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁴ Katzenstein, ‘The second coming?’, p. 383.

space for IR to evolve without these rigid categories, while appreciating local contexts and specificities. Bearing in mind the ‘gatekeeping’ highlighted by Alejandro and Bilgin’s contention that the ‘periphery’ is yet to be considered as constitutive, there remains, however, a long way to go. Our approach to Dialogue among Civilisations contributes to showing *how* the ‘periphery’ or ‘other’ is in fact constitutive.

The issue of agency to engage with ideas is important. As scholars we need to be careful not to critique mid-20th century anti-colonial nationalists for essentially not being sufficiently anti-colonial because they use or reconstruct categories or values that have been associated with European imperial knowledge. For instance, Murray notes Fanon’s communication with the Iranian intellectual, Ali Shariati.⁴⁵ While there may be disagreement about approaches relating to how to deal with colonialism, as scholars in the 21st century we should also be careful not to presume that Shariati’s ideas were not sufficiently anti-colonial because of his use of the non-West/West binary and aspirations for a post-colonial Iran based on a combination of Marxism and Islam. Rather, it is essential to embrace and be open to the *agency* of all, whether that is the post-colonial subject, the periphery, or the ‘other’, to engage with ideas, regardless of the genealogy, and ‘reconstitute the international’.⁴⁶ The agency to engage in intellectual critique by any subject, post-colonial or not, must be accepted. To disregard this agency is also Orientalism.

Legitimising the inclusion in IR of those on the periphery is especially pertinent in the context of actors that are often represented and discursively constructed as the ‘other’ in global politics and academia. Representation of actors and subjects is ‘an inherent and important aspect of global political life’.⁴⁷ Consequently, this discursive articulation produces knowledge that is subsequently presented as truth. This ‘truth’ then makes ‘various courses of action possible’.⁴⁸ An actor that has been systematically constructed as the ‘other’ is Iran. The epistemic mapping that Murray and others identify is particularly evident in US foreign policy and scholarship towards Iran.

Although the Barack Obama and Joe Biden administrations have a more nuanced approach, the ‘rogue state’, ‘axis of evil’, and ‘rogue regime’ labels employed by Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump, respectively, show that Iran is viewed *simply* in terms of a ‘threat’ or enemy because it is considered ‘irrational’ and therefore in need of intervention.⁴⁹ Additionally, by condemning an actor as ‘evil’, it is presented as something that ‘can neither be fully comprehended nor addressed other than through militaristic forms of dissuasion and retaliation’.⁵⁰ Such a dogmatic and static approach is particularly evident in some US scholarship. Despite the Islamic Republic of Iran’s moves towards more pragmatic and moderate foreign policy during the 1990s, scholarship tended to focus on Iran’s military capability, offering prescriptions to policymakers on how to ‘deal’ with Iran, sailing close to the rhetoric of US neo-conservatism and the ‘rogue state’ paradigm.⁵¹

The implication of such policies and scholarship, however, is that ‘Iran is *always* the rogue, static “other” that is fundamentally different to the *forever* benign, yet (paradoxically) fluid “self”

⁴⁵Murray, ‘Imperial dialectics and epistemic mapping’, p. 427.

⁴⁶Jabri, ‘Disarming norms’.

⁴⁷Doty, *Imperial Encounters*, p. 5. See also Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 21.

⁴⁸Doty, *Imperial Encounters*, p. 5.

⁴⁹See, for example, Adam Tarock, ‘US–Iran relations: Heading for confrontation?’, *Third World Quarterly*, 17:1 (1996), pp. 149–68; Constance Duncombe, ‘Representation, recognition and foreign policy in the Iran–US relationship’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 22:3 (2015), pp. 622–45; Elham Kadkhodae and Zainab Tari, ‘Otherising Iran in American political discourse: Case study of a post-JCPOA senate hearing on Iran sanctions’, *Third World Quarterly*, 40:1 (2019), pp. 109–28; Foad Izadi and Hakimeh Saghaye-Biria, ‘A discourse analysis of elite American newspaper editorials: The case of Iran’s nuclear program’, *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 31:2 (2007), pp. 140–65.

⁵⁰Roland Bleiker, ‘A rogue is a rogue is a rogue: US foreign policy and the Korean nuclear crisis’, *International Affairs*, 79:4 (2003), pp. 719–37 (p. 731).

⁵¹See Patrick Clawson, *Iran’s Challenge to the West: How, When, and Why* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1993); Michael Rubin, ‘US foreign policy and rogue states’, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 3:3 (1999), pp. 72–7; Patrick Clawson and Michael Rubin, *Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004).

in the context of *both* IR and foreign policy.⁵² Notably, this dichotomising narrative of Iran and the West builds on long-standing Orientalism. The othering of Iran or Persia in some Ancient Greek texts is well documented.⁵³ Furthermore, certain events, such as the military conflict between the Ancient Greeks and the Persians between 490 and 479 BCE, have been repeatedly interpreted as the ‘triumph of western ideals of freedom and self-determination over slavish submission to repressive forces of oriental despotism.’⁵⁴ At the turn of the 17th century, European travellers and merchants associated ‘Persians’ with ‘despotism’ and ‘decadence’ and no longer the ‘noble Persians’ of Herodotus.⁵⁵ In the 18th century, Montesquieu’s *Lettres persanes* was based on an imagined figuration of the Orient as exotic and despotic while also critiquing French society.⁵⁶ By the 19th century, ‘Persia’ was imagined as being prone to ‘corruption’ and political ‘decay.’⁵⁷

Significantly, however, some recent IR scholarship has had a more nuanced approach to Iran’s international relations and worldview. This includes the Iran–Saudi Arabia relationship,⁵⁸ its soft power projection,⁵⁹ studies exploring the salience of identity,⁶⁰ and wider transnational linkages in terms of identity and religious networks.⁶¹ The ‘rogue state’ approach has also come under criticism for its demonising tendencies.⁶² In political theory, anti-colonial political thinkers such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Shariati, and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini have been revisited in light of developments in post-colonial theory.⁶³ Such scholarship is due in part to the ‘global turn’ in the humanities and social sciences, which builds on the growing critiques regarding Eurocentrism of the early 2000s. Indeed, Global IR has enhanced visibility of critical theories, ‘including decolonial and postcolonial theories, and the sociology of knowledge’, allowing for ‘fuller representations of the “global”.’⁶⁴

Building on this more nuanced IR scholarship, there is also a need for a non-Eurocentric relational approach to Khatami and the Dialogue among Civilisations. Our contention, therefore, is that in order to move away from IR’s Eurocentrism towards a more global and inclusive IR, there is a need for an approach that *simultaneously* addresses several issues. First, a historical and relational

⁵² Shabnam Holliday, ‘Populism, the international and methodological nationalism: Global order and the Iran–Israel nexus’, *Political Studies*, 68:1 (2020), pp. 3–19.

⁵³ See Henry Colburn, ‘Orientalism, postcolonialism, and the Achaemenid empire: Meditations on Bruce Lincoln’s religion, empire, and torture’, *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 54:2 (2011), pp. 87–103, for discussion and review of scholarship on Ancient Greek depictions of Ancient Iran. It should be noted that not all depictions were negative.

⁵⁴ Subho Basu, Craig Champion, and Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, ‘300: The use and abuse of history’, *The Classical Outlook*, 85:1 (2007), pp. 28–32 (p. 28).

⁵⁵ Ansari, *Politics of Nationalism*, pp. 9–10.

⁵⁶ Lisa Lowe, ‘Rereadings in orientalism: Oriental inventions and inventions of the Orient in Montesquieu’s “Lettres persanes”’, *Cultural Critique*, 15 (1990), pp. 115–43 (pp. 119, 122).

⁵⁷ Ansari, *Politics of Nationalism*, pp. 11–12.

⁵⁸ Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: IB Tauris, 2013); Banafsheh Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran Friends or Foes?* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).

⁵⁹ Nadia von Maltzahn, *The Syria–Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East* (London: IB Tauris, 2015); Edward Wastnidge, ‘The modalities of Iranian soft power: From cultural diplomacy to soft war’, *Politics*, 35:3–4 (2015), pp. 364–77.

⁶⁰ Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry, ‘State identity in Iranian foreign policy’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 43:4 (2016), pp. 613–29; Holliday, ‘Populism, the international and methodological nationalism’.

⁶¹ Simon Fuchs, ‘The long shadow of the state: The Iranian revolution, Saudi influence, and the shifting arguments of anti-Shi’i sectarianism in Pakistan’, in Laurence Louër and Christophe Jaffrelot (eds), *Pan-Islamic Connections: Transnational Networks between South Asia and the Gulf* (London: Hurst, 2019), pp. 217–32; Mohammad-Reza Kalantari, ‘The Shi’i clergy and perceived opportunity structures: Political activism in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 48:2 (2019), pp. 1–15.

⁶² Robert Litwak, *Rogue States and U.S. Foreign Policy: Containment after the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2001).

⁶³ See Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, ‘Gharbzadegi, colonial capitalism and the racial state in Iran’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 24:2 (2020), pp. 173–95; Siavash Saffari, *Beyond Shariati: Modernity, Cosmopolitanism and Islam in Iranian Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Kamran Matin, *Recasting Iranian Modernity: International Relations and Social Change* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁶⁴ Beverley Loke and Catherine Owen, ‘Mapping practices and spatiality in IR knowledge production: From detachment to emancipation’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 28:1 (2022), pp. 30–57 (p. 31).

approach that appreciates socio-political and intellectual context is essential. Second, the legacy of European imperial knowledge and how it is used must be appreciated *alongside* multiple intellectual heritages. Third, it is crucial to appreciate of the *agency* of subjects and agents to construct the international and engage with bodies of knowledge as they wish. With this in mind, our contention is that an in-depth understanding of Iran alongside a revisiting of Khatami's Dialogue among Civilisations can act as a means of bringing the perspective of the 'other' into debates on the international and our epistemological and ontological understanding of the West. Dialogue among Civilisations is better understood through a simultaneous appreciation of Iran's political cultures and intellectual heritages. Furthermore, we contend that our approach to Dialogue among Civilisations is all the more pertinent in light of how Iran is constructed in a discipline that claims to examine the world. This highlights a complex set of dynamics that should be considered in our understanding of the international.

Blurred borders: Iran's multiple heritages as context

Khatami's intellectual and political thought is grounded in a number of debates regarding Iran's political, social, and economic transformation. These include (1) the late 19th century and subsequent Constitutional Revolution (1906–11); (2) the 1950s leading up to the 1979 Revolution; and (3) the post-revolutionary intellectual movement Reformism, or Reform movement, in the late 1980s and 1990s, which sought to bring together democracy and Islam in the context of the Islamic Republic. Its origins are attributed to vigorous debates regarding the nature of the Islamic Republic following the end of the Iran–Iraq War (1980–8).⁶⁵

The impact of Western culture and civilization, Iran's Islamic and pre-Islamic heritages, and how intellectuals have engaged with these influences have influenced debates regarding Iran's political, economic, and social development.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Khatami's personal intellectual endeavours demonstrate a critical engagement with not only Islamic philosophy, including the religio-political basis of the Islamic Republic of Iran, *velāyat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist), but also Western political thought that demonstrates a process of taking, reconstructing, and renegotiating ideas. Thus, Iranian intellectual history needs to be seen in terms of negotiation, hybridity, and fluidity.⁶⁷ As noted, such an approach is itself integral to the idea of Dialogue among Civilisations.

Dialogue among Civilisations explicitly relates to a long-standing intellectual and political debate in Iran about what is considered Iran's authentic heritage. This is a negotiation and engagement with *Irānīyat* (Iran's pre-Islamic heritage, or ancient Persian civilisation),⁶⁸ *Islāmīyat* (Islam and Islamic heritage and civilisation), and Western civilisation. The approach is drawn specifically from the Reformist intellectual Abdolkarim Soroush and his belief that Iran has three 'components' or 'cultures': Iranian, Islamic, and Western.⁶⁹ In the context of IR, Dialogue among Civilisations is largely seen in terms of a dialogue between East and West, or in terms of a framework for a global, pluralist, and just construction of world order following the end of the Cold War.⁷⁰ However, it also needs to be seen in terms of a longer historical trajectory and of the complexity of an epistemology that questions our ontological understanding of the West.

⁶⁵ Ali Ansari, *Islam, Iran and Democracy* (London: Royal Institute of Managing Change, 2006), p. 148.

⁶⁶ Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. xiv.

⁶⁷ Joanna Degroot, 'Beyond the imitation–rejection binary: Iranians in the global networks of manufacturing, visual practices, and political discourse c.1870–1920', Presentation given at the British Institute of Persian Studies' 'Iran and the International' workshop, Plymouth, UK, 15–16 September 2021.

⁶⁸ *Irānīyat* refers to the Achaemenids (550–330 BCE) or Sasanians (224–650 CE). During Khatami's presidency, there was a 'rediscovery' of Sasanian Iran; see Shabnam Holliday, *Defining Iran: Politics of Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2011).

⁶⁹ Ali Ansari, 'Civilisational identity and foreign policy in Iran', in Brenda Shaffer (ed.), *The Limits of Culture: Islam and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 241–62 (p. 243).

⁷⁰ Fabio Petito, 'The global political discourse of Dialogue among Civilizations: Mohammad Khatami and Václav Havel', *Global Change Peace & Security*, 19:2 (2007), pp. 103–26.

The significance of *Irānīyat* is that it relates to Iran's *pre*-Islamic heritage. With the archaeological rediscovery of Iran's ancient heritage during the 19th century, *Irānīyat* came to play an important role among intellectuals, such as Mirza Fathali Akhundzadeh (1812–78), Mirza Agha Khan Kermani (1853–96), and later Hassan Taqizadeh (1878–1970).⁷¹ *Irānīyat* was used alongside a critical engagement with Western modernity and Western political thought to address increasing Russian and British influence on Iran.⁷² An explicit engagement with *Irānīyat* alongside Western civilisation would also come to be important aspects of Iranian politics through the approach to nationalism of Iran's monarchs Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–1941) and Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941–1979).⁷³ After the 1979 Revolution, which deposed the Pahlavis, and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic, there was a renewed political engagement with *Irānīyat*, particularly among Reformists. In this environment, *Irānīyat* gained considerable significance as an integral part of Dialogue among Civilisations.

The blurring of West and non-West is also evident in the relationship with Marxism in Iranian politics. The 1950s and 1960s witnessed a strong anti-colonial intellectual trend that saw a blending of leftist and Marxist political thought, associated with the West, and Islam. This was in the context of increasing external influence on Iran's affairs and Mohammad Reza Shah's authoritarianism. For instance, Siavash Saffari highlights how Shariati sought to 'advance a socio-politically progressive discourse of indigenous modernity that engages freely with a wide range of emancipatory projects in the modern world'.⁷⁴ In a similar vein, Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi has offered a compelling rereading of Al-e Ahmad that goes beyond the 'nativist' renditions, showing that he 'shares a series of common preoccupations with more familiar anti-colonial thinkers'.⁷⁵

Also building on these multiple heritages, Khomeini 'combined and infused traditional Islamic discourse with "modern" Western ideas and concepts'⁷⁶ to articulate a 'religious nationalism'⁷⁷ and the idea of an Islamic Republic. Khomeini's treatise 'Islamic Government', published in 1970, introduced the idea of *velāyat-e faqih*, which envisioned the establishment of clerical rule in Iran in place of the monarchy. Khomeini, as one of the highest-ranking clerics, argued that the highest-ranking Islamic jurist (*faqih*) should be the ruler, and that accepting the rule of their religious guardians in the form of the *ulema* was a religious duty. In 'Islamic Government', Khomeini sought to further increase the status of the *ulema* and promote the idea of the *faqih* as a legitimate sovereign. This work was also key in propagating the idea of a revolution against the Pahlavi regime.

Therefore, despite the appearance of *velāyat-e faqih* as a concept based on ideas of Islamic jurisprudence, one needs to be aware that Khomeini's 'Islamic Government' also contains much in the way of direct appeals to 'the Iranian people', and its political message was crafted accordingly. The populist egalitarianism that drew on the political thought of modern Iranian political thinkers, including Shariati, allowed space for a plethora of non-religious political activists and thinkers to become involved in the revolutionary project. Thus, on assuming power, Khomeini's desires for the new Iranian state were shaped by this wider coalition of secular and religious nationalists, leftists including Marxists, and others, which resulted in the establishment of the Islamic Republic. This was therefore a state project not only founded on a unique, and arguably modernist, take on political Shi'ism, but also a republic that drew on a long-standing Iranian intellectual engagement with Western ideas of democracy and democratic institutions, and the anti-imperialism of Marxist factions. The very foundation of a state that combined elements of traditional and modern Islamic theories of government, along with what would be deemed more 'recognisable' (in the West) as

⁷¹Touraj Daraye, 'Persianate contribution to the study of antiquity: E'temad Al-Saltaneh's nativisation of the Qajars', *Iran*, 54:1 (2016), pp. 39–45.

⁷²See Ali Ansari, 'Taqizadeh and European civilisation', *Iran*, 54:1 (2016), pp. 47–58; Pejman Abdolmohammadi, 'The influences of Western ideas on Kermani's political thought', *Iran*, 54:1 (2016), pp. 23–38.

⁷³See Ansari, *Politics of Nationalism*.

⁷⁴Saffari, *Beyond Shariati*, p. 5.

⁷⁵Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 'Gharbzadegi, colonial capitalism and the racial state', p. 173.

⁷⁶Matin, *Recasting Iranian Modernity*, pp. 141–42.

⁷⁷Ansari, *Politics of Nationalism*.

democratic and institutional features, subsequently provided space for a later wave of Reformist thinkers to develop political thought that drew on this multifaceted heritage. Though Khatami's scholarly work draws on modernist Shi'i thinkers, discussed below, and he has lauded the influence of late 19th-/early 20th-century constitutionalist thinkers such as Ayatollah Mirza Hossein Na'ini,⁷⁸ he remains very much a man of the Islamic Republic, with his political ideas articulated within this unique political climate. His political thought was distinct from such thinkers due to its attempts to enhance civil society in the context of the Islamic Republic, which also continues to set him in marked contrast to more conservative elements of the Iranian polity, such as those around the Supreme Leader, who emphasise religious over popular sovereignty in Iranian politics.

Khatami and the Dialogue among Civilisations

Not only was Khatami socialised in a rich intellectual environment based on multiple interconnected heritages, he also explicitly engaged with multiple bodies of knowledge regardless of their provenance. Raised in a clerical family, Khatami's religious studies began in 1961, when he began attending the Qom seminary at which he studied until 1965. It was here that he became a follower of Khomeini, and after his move to Isfahan to study Philosophy in 1965, the young Khatami became more involved in Islamic politics, beginning with his activities in the Association of Muslim Students at the university where he worked closely with Khomeini's son Ahmad, among others. Having obtained his BA in Philosophy, Khatami began postgraduate studies at the University of Tehran in 1969 before returning to Qom two years later to further study Islamic law, jurisprudence, and philosophy. While in Qom, Khatami and other former students of Khomeini formed *Jāme'eh-ye rowhāniyat-e mobārez* (The Society of Combatant Clerics), a group that played a key role in mobilising opposition to Mohammad Reza Shah, and went on to constitute the main clerical body of the Islamic Republican Party following the revolution.⁷⁹ In 1978, just prior to the revolution, Khatami was chosen to head the Hamburg Islamic Institute in West Germany, at the time a hub of opposition to the Pahlavi monarchy, which played a key role in organising revolutionary activity among the Iranian diaspora.

Prior to becoming president, Khatami held a number of roles. In his role as Minister for Culture and Islamic Guidance under former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, he had been responsible for facilitating limited openings in the cultural and social sphere. Khatami was forced to tender his resignation in 1992 following criticism of his liberalising tendencies by conservatives in the Islamic Republic establishment. Following this, he took up a post as head of Iran's National Library. While in this role he published two notable works on Islamic and Western philosophy. They shine a light on the antecedents of his own political thought and later found a more applied articulation within Dialogue among Civilisations. In *Bim-e mowj* (Fear of the Wave) of 1372/1993,⁸⁰ Khatami pays particular attention to Shi'i thinkers, including Baqir al-Sadr, Morteza Motahhari, and Allameh Tabataba'i, who sought to reconcile Islam with modernity.⁸¹ Within this work, Khatami offers implied criticisms of the revolutionary project in Iran, emphasising the necessity of greater social and individual freedoms for Iran's development. Khatami's *Az donyā-ye shahr tā shahr-e donyā: sayri dar andisheh-ye siyāsi-ye gharb* (From the World of the City to the City of the World: A Survey of Western Political Thought) is something of a review of liberal political philosophy, focusing particularly on the work of John Locke.⁸² Khatami emphasised that Locke, and other liberal thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, represented dynamic forces questioning the problems of their time, and

⁷⁸Wastnidge, *Diplomacy and Reform*, p. 34.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁸⁰The Gregorian calendar is not usually used in Iran. Therefore, the Iranian date is also provided.

⁸¹Mohammad Khatami, *Bim-e mowj* (Tehran: Nashr-e simā-ye javān, 1372 [1993–4]).

⁸²Mohammad Khatami, *Az donyā-ye shahr tā shahr-e donyā: sayri dar andisheh-ye siyāsi-ye gharb* (Tehran: Nashr-e Nay, 1373 [1994–5]).

in doing so implied that his own political philosophy (and ultimately desire for reform in Iran) drew on a similar critical bent.⁸³

However, his work in the field and his own socially liberal inclinations do not necessarily indicate acquiescence to liberal precepts and adherence to wider liberal philosophy. Khatami was well versed in liberal political philosophy but was often quite critical of it, using it as a counterfoil for his own conceptions of how Iran should progress. In a similar manner, the familiarity of Khatami and his advisers with the work of more modern Western scholarship in the fields of philosophy and political theory, such as that of Jürgen Habermas and the wider Frankfurt School, was useful in a critical sense. This was because it provided Khatami and other religious intellectuals working within the system an intellectual platform from which to critique the West,⁸⁴ and one that was distinct from the more conservative imaginations of political development in the Islamic Republic.

Khatami's understanding of Western political philosophy played a significant role in his own development of Dialogue among Civilisations. It is also very much a product of its time, in terms of debates about world order and the future of the post-Cold War world, including the Clash of Civilisations, but with a marked antithetical bent. Thus, while plurality for Huntington has negative ramifications for the hegemony of the West, for Khatami it exists as a positive force. There is also a clear contradistinction between the 'politicisation' of civilisational reference points found in Huntington's formulation that led to 'rivalry' and Khatami's conceptualisation, which instead emphasises the 'socialisation' of civilisation through a peaceful and cooperative political culture that facilitates dialogue.⁸⁵

As noted, Khatami's first major international presentation of the Dialogue among Civilisations was significant because it came during Iran's hosting of the OIC's summit. Khatami utilised this major international event, one that in itself was indication of Tehran's ongoing 'rehabilitation' on the world stage and the first of its kind to take place in Iran, to place his calls for dialogue in the context of an Islamic conception of civil society. This conception was mindful of the achievements of Western civilisation but drew on its own history for inspiration. Khatami emphasised acceptance and understanding of other cultures, which he cast in opposition to regression and withdrawal. He stated:

The relations between the Islamic world and others [are] also fraught with mistrust, misunderstanding, and misconceived perceptions, part of which is rooted in history and another part of which emanates from hegemonic relationships, or are a consequence of the fanning of chronic misunderstandings by hegemons. In this connection, through providing the necessary grounds for dialogue among civilizations and cultures, with the people of intellect taking a pivotal role, we should open the way towards a fundamental understanding which lies at the very foundation of genuine peace.⁸⁶

The Persian-language term usually employed by Khatami for dialogue, *goftegu*, is a direct translation and also a synonym for debate or conversation. One of Iran's best-known journals carries the same name, publishing on Iranian culture, history, and society since 1972. Though the Persian etymological roots of the term do not correspond precisely to the Greek origin found in English, its meaning is the same in terms of its antonymic relation to monologue. Importantly for its use in this context, Moshirzadeh notes that 'what differentiates dialogue from monologue is that a monologue represents the reflexive absence of an other.'⁸⁷ This remains fundamental for how the concept was applied both practically and philosophically.

⁸³Wastnidge, *Diplomacy and Reform*, p. 28.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 50.

⁸⁵Seifzadeh, 'Cooperation within global civilisations', pp. 48–50.

⁸⁶Mohammad Khatami, 'The Islamic world and modern challenges: Statement by Mohammad Khatami to the eighth session of the Organisation of Islamic Conference', in Mohammad Khatami (ed.), *Islam, Dialogue and Civil Society* (Canberra: Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies–Australian National University, 2000), pp. 14–25.

⁸⁷Moshirzadeh, 'The idea of Dialogue of Civilizations', p. 216.

Notably, however, the notion of Dialogue among Civilisations did not start with Khatami. The desire to place Iran at the centre of global conversations that draw on civilisational reference points has a deeper genealogy, both in terms of the history of Iran's broader foreign relations and within its own intellectual history and debates around its encounter with modernity. Regarding the former, one can observe efforts to acknowledge Iran's status as a great civilisation in its attempted representations to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919.⁸⁸ Here, Iran presented its wishes to be included not only on the basis of its historical contribution to world civilisation, but also in a way that was cognisant of not merely aping European civilisation on the quest towards 'modernity', and which maintained its then-precarious sovereignty.⁸⁹ Later in the 20th century, Mohammad Reza Shah sought to harness Iran's civilisational grandeur both in a performative sense of harking back to the great days of Persian power in the ancient world, and also through a sense of 'civilisational developmentalism' that was destined to put Iran on the path back towards greatness.⁹⁰

The term Dialogue among Civilisations, though presented by Khatami largely as a response to Huntington, pre-dates any notion of the Clash of Civilisations and indeed Khatami's political career in the Islamic Republic. The noted Iranian philosopher Daryush Shayegan had previously organised a symposium on Dialogue among Civilisations in 1977, during his time in charge of the Iranian Centre for the Study of Civilization (1976–9).⁹¹ Like Khatami, Shayegan's interest in civilisational and cultural encounters are rooted in debates about the impact of modernity on the Islamic world, with both adopting a similar stance in terms of cautioning against regression and withdrawal from such an encounter.⁹² However, while there are some similarities in terms of their civilisational reference points, they differ, with Khatami's framing drawing on more explicit Islamic reference points and modernist Shi'i thinkers.⁹³ However, Shayegan often takes aim at the clerical elite in post-revolutionary Iran.⁹⁴ Though Khatami has also critiqued Iran's political (and by extension, clerical) elite, his position within the system means that he has to make more use inference and subtle framings, such as lambasting traditionalists and authoritarian tendencies within the Islamic Republic.⁹⁵

A key contributor to the intellectual development of Dialogue among Civilisations was Khatami's close adviser and academic, Hadi Khaniki. In terms of assessing the concept's utility as a potential framework for international order, Khaniki highlights the necessity of understanding how Dialogue among Civilisations relates to liberal and communitarian approaches.⁹⁶ For Khaniki, and indeed Khatami, the liberalism of Hobbes and Locke is seen as too interest-oriented and individualistic. Seeing the group, rather than the individual, as the primary social unit facilitates a hermeneutic dialogue between cultural and social networks and horizons.⁹⁷ Some scholars have cited the closeness of Habermas's ideas on communicative action to those of Khatami's calls for dialogue,⁹⁸ with Khaniki himself noting the potential validity of synthesising both approaches.⁹⁹

⁸⁸ Oliver Bast, 'Iran and the Paris Peace conference', *History of Foreign Relations Quarterly*, 1:1 (2000), pp. 49–66.

⁸⁹ Philip Grobrien, 'Iran and imperial nationalism in 1919', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 57:2 (2020), pp. 292–309 (p. 299).

⁹⁰ Cyrus Schayegh, 'Iran's global long 1970s: Empire, civilisational developmentalism, and the crisis of the Global North', in Roham Alvandi (ed.), *The Age of Aryamehr: Late Pahlavi Iran and Its Global Entanglements* (London: Gingko, 2018), pp. 260–90.

⁹¹ Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals*, p. 149.

⁹² See Daryush Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West* (London: Saqi Books, 1992); Khatami, 'The Islamic world and modern challenges'.

⁹³ Wastnidge, *Diplomacy and Reform*, pp. 47–8.

⁹⁴ Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia*, pp. 25, 158, 178.

⁹⁵ See, for example, Khatami's 'Nāmeḥ-ye barāye fardā', written at the end of his presidency, where he ruminates on some of the criticisms of his period in office, and the constraints that he faced as president. The full text in Persian is available at: <https://dolat7-8.president.ir/fa/4085>.

⁹⁶ Khaniki, 'Dialogue of Civilisations', pp. 83–93.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁹⁸ Marc Lynch, 'The Dialogue of Civilisations and international public spheres', *Millennium*, 29:2 (2000), pp. 307–30; Ansari, 'Civilisational Identity' (2006), p. 133; Moshirzadeh, 'Critical international theory and Dialogue of Civilisations'.

⁹⁹ Khaniki, 'Dialogue of Civilisations', p. 86.

For Moshirzadeh, the Dialogue among Civilisations represents a public debate at the international level, which presupposes an embryonic form of public sphere in which dialogue can be shaped.¹⁰⁰ However, the link should not be overstated, and the citing of Habermas in this context only goes so far, often ignoring the potential for ‘aggressive cosmopolitanism’ highlighted by Jennifer Mitzen.¹⁰¹ For Khaniki, Habermas’s argument is still based on the independent, self-sufficient individual, whereas for himself and Khatami the outward aim is towards using more communitarian-informed principles to establish an ethical system at the international level.¹⁰² Moshirzadeh highlights a further difference in terms of Habermas’s insistence on the necessity of a shared modern lifeworld for conducting dialogues, whereas Khatami sees the capacity in *all* civilisations to find dialogues as a way to reach truth.¹⁰³

Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Alisdair MacIntyre, and others, the concept’s philosophical roots are embedded in notions of ‘otherness’ and ‘looking from without’, insofar as understanding of the ‘self’ or identity is only possible with the presence of an ‘other’. The thoughts of Khaniki come close to Xavier Guillaume’s conceptualisation of the ‘hermeneutical locus’ when discussing the role of dialogue and identity in IR.¹⁰⁴ This involves the ‘interweaving in a specific place (the utterance) of an identity’s expression, its contextuality and its relations to other identities (other utterances).’¹⁰⁵ Like Khaniki, Guillaume adopts a Bakhtinian notion of ‘self’ and ‘other’ through a dialogism defined by such interweaving as opposed to monologism.¹⁰⁶ In Khatami’s formulation, this manifests itself in a critical reflection on ‘self’ and ‘other’ and, through this reflection, poses critical questions about the relationship between tradition and modernity, summarised in the following:

Anyone who looks at himself/herself as ‘absolute’ and considers himself/herself as absolutely ‘good’ while considering the other as absolutely ‘evil’, not only fails to understand the other, but similarly fails to know himself/herself.¹⁰⁷

Khaniki sees the issues embedded in Dialogue among Civilisations as ‘amenable’ to being placed in communitarian contexts, arguing how at the international level, communitarian principles are aimed at setting a ‘global consensus’ as a starting point for establishing an ‘ethical system.’¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Fabio Petito presents Dialogue among Civilisations as a form of international theory in its own right,¹⁰⁹ which comes close to Khatami’s own wishes for the concept being able to be used to forge ‘a new paradigm in international relations.’¹¹⁰ Petito views the concept as a ‘global political discourse’ formed in response to the post–Cold War arguments of Fukayama’s *End of History* and Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilizations’. He is against what he claims to be the widespread misperception of Dialogue among Civilisations as a ‘rhetorical escamotage used for strategic reasons.’

¹⁰⁰ Moshirzadeh, ‘Critical international theory and Dialogue of Civilisations’, p. 103.

¹⁰¹ Jennifer Mitzen, ‘Reading Habermas in anarchy: Multilateral diplomacy and global public spheres’, *American Political Science Review*, 99:3 (2005), pp. 401–17.

¹⁰² Khaniki, ‘Dialogue of Civilisations’, p. 96.

¹⁰³ Moshirzadeh, ‘The idea of Dialogue of Civilizations’, p. 222.

¹⁰⁴ Xavier Guillaume, ‘Reflexivity and subjectivity: A dialogical perspective for and on International Relations theory’, *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung*, 3:3 (2002), pp. 1–26.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁶ Xavier Guillaume, ‘Foreign policy and the politics of alterity: A dialogical understanding of International Relations’, *Millennium*, 31:1 (2002), pp. 1–26 (p. 6).

¹⁰⁷ Mohammad Khatami, ‘Foreword’, in Fred Dallmayr and Abbas Manoochehri (eds), *Civilisational Dialogue and Political Thought: Tehran Papers* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007), pp. xi–xii.

¹⁰⁸ Khaniki, ‘Dialogue of Civilisations’, pp. 93, 96.

¹⁰⁹ Fabio Petito, ‘Khatami’s Dialogue among Civilisations as international political theory’, in Fred Dallmayr and Abbas Manoochehri (eds), *Civilisational Dialogue and Political Thought: Tehran Papers* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007), pp. 161–81.

¹¹⁰ Mohammad Khatami, *Islam, Dialogue and Civil Society* (Canberra: Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies–Australian National University, 2000), p. 2.

Rather, Petito sees the concept as ‘a genuine vision on how to construct a more peaceful and just world order after the end of the Cold War.’¹¹¹

However, in addition to this approach on world order and Iranian foreign policy, the development of Dialogue among Civilisations needs to be simultaneously understood in the context of intellectual debates regarding the nature of the Islamic Republic as a domestic project. This can in part be seen in terms of the implementation of Khomeini’s *velāyat-e faqih* with the establishment of the Islamic Republic and the subsequent Reform Movement. Reformists argued for Islamic democracy, adherence to the constitution, civil rights and importance of civil society, and the rule of law.¹¹² This coincided with Iran’s post-revolutionary experience entering something of a ‘thermidor’ phase, with figures such as Khatami challenging orthodoxy of the Islamic Republic’s revolutionary political thought and vying to return to the ideals of the 1979 Revolution.

Thus, Dialogue among Civilisations was typical of the climate in Iranian intellectual circles during this period, and that which Khatami sought to foster as Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Indeed, Khatami’s primary presidential election strategist in 1997 was Saeed Hajjarian, a Reformist who sought to assert political legitimacy over religious rule through Islamic democracy. Khatami’s harnessing of Reformism along with the backing of Rafsanjani’s political faction helped Khatami to secure such a large electoral victory, which shook the conservative establishment. Significantly, as president, Khatami established Reformism as an official political discourse. Domestically, this allowed for and legitimised a relative liberalisation of the political environment. This was evident in the growth of civil society through the proliferation of non-government organisations and media. This civil society space highlighted debates regarding women in the context of the Islamic Republic through publications such as *Zanān Magazine* and *Farzāneh Women’s Studies Journal*. It also allowed dialogue with the outside world through the arts, among other activities, as was evident in the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art’s activities.¹¹³

Khatami was able to use his position to disseminate Dialogue among Civilisations internationally. This positioning of Dialogue among Civilisations arguably represented something of a publicity coup for the Islamic Republic on the world stage.¹¹⁴ In practical terms, Khatami’s 1998 CNN interview addressing the ‘American people’ was a significant example of Dialogue among Civilisations referring to ‘American civilisation’ and the need for a dialogue between Iran and ‘Western civilisation.’¹¹⁵ Furthermore, that it provoked serious academic and policy debate, particularly during Khatami’s first term, is testament to the utility of a concept that had both a deeper philosophical argument and also a practical application and intent in Iranian foreign policy. However, as a former minister of Khatami’s and former head of the Tehran-based Centre for Dialogue among Civilisations, Ataollah Mohajerani, noted, within Iran the concept was negatively impacted by political divisions between reformist and conservative factions which hampered its reception.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, ultimately it is the Supreme Leader that has overall control over Iran’s relations and security.

In Iran, there has been an uneasy path regarding the continued saliency of Dialogue among Civilisations. By the end of Khatami’s presidency, popularity dwindled with many Iranians feeling betrayed. The year 2005 saw a marked change in Iran’s foreign policy with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the reversal of many of Khatami’s initiatives and aspirations. In the context of the 2009/10 popular uprising following the controversial re-election of Ahmadinejad, however, Reformism played an important role in the Green Movement’s ideas but was vehemently rejected

¹¹¹Petito, ‘Khatami’s Dialogue among Civilisations’, pp. 162, 166.

¹¹²Ansari, *Islam, Iran, and Democracy* (2006), pp. 114–15.

¹¹³Holliday, *Defining Iran*, p. 130.

¹¹⁴See, for example, press reports including Robert Fisk, ‘Muslim glare turns on divided Iran’, *The Independent* (10 December 1997); ‘Iran’s diplomatic offensive’, *New York Times* (23 September 1998); Peter Kiernan, ‘Khatami’s challenge’, *The Middle East* (May 1998).

¹¹⁵Holliday, *Defining Iran*, p. 111.

¹¹⁶Interview with Ataollah Mohajerani, cited in Wastnidge, *Diplomacy and Reform*, pp. 137–8.

by many protestors.¹¹⁷ In 2013, Dialogue among Civilisations once again became prevalent with Hassan Rouhani's presidency. A clear lineage from Khatami to Rouhani was evident in the similarities of their approaches to Iranian foreign policy and Khatami's support for Rouhani. Khatami lauded Rouhani's 'platform of prudence and hope as a practical translation of the idea of dialogue among nations as to the realm of politics.'¹¹⁸ In practical terms, Rouhani drew on Khatami's approach in utilising the UN to articulate his concept of a 'World against Violence and Extremism', citing the need for an international 'coalition for enduring peace'.¹¹⁹ Later, he emphasised constructive dialogue with all nations.¹²⁰ This included using the UN to announce the 'Coalition for HOPE' (or Hormuz Peace Endeavour) as a means of addressing Persian Gulf security.¹²¹ On a domestic level, however, Rouhani's presidency, and the subsequent Ebrahim Raisi administration, also witnessed increasing dissatisfaction, with several periods of protests in response to the impact of climate change and mismanagement, the economic situation exacerbated by corruption and the reimposition of sanctions, and compulsory *hejab* among other issues. In September 2022, the killing of the Kurdish Iranian woman Jina Mahsa Amini while in custody over what the Islamic Republic considers improper *hejab* sparked a new wave of widespread protests. Significantly, these protests demonstrated an absolute rejection of the idea of Islamic Republic, and Reformism as part of that, calling for a new revolution, while reformist figures, Khatami included, sought to find a middle path between the government and protesters.¹²²

On a global level, however, the idea of Dialogue among Civilisations continued to find an application under the auspices of the UN-based 'Alliance of Civilisations'. The formation was co-sponsored by Spanish and Turkish prime ministers at the time, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. A high-level group was formed by then-Secretary-General Kofi Annan involving Khatami, Desmond Tutu, and others to continue efforts at preventing the Clash of Civilisations. While we do not have space in this article to expound on this further, there have been a great number of works cited in this paper and beyond on Dialogue among Civilisations since 2005, further evidencing the continuing salience of the concept to debates in IR.

Dialogue among Civilisations: Beyond the West/non-West bifurcation

The very notion of Dialogue among Civilisations provides an epistemological and ontological challenge to the West/non-West dichotomisation. This is because the concept is based on taking and adapting ideas from multiple epistemes to create not only an international political project, speaking to issues such as world order, but also a domestic one that is interconnected with the international. Furthermore, it demonstrates an acute understanding that Iran's political culture simultaneously draws on multiple heritages. Thus, dialogue and fluidity, rather than dichotomisation and bifurcation, are at the heart of the concept.

An appreciation of this requires an understanding of both how Khatami defines civilisation, culture, tradition, and modernity, all of which are considered as 'human constructs' and ambiguous terms,¹²³ and his approach to Iran's intellectual and historical heritages. At the heart of Khatami's aspirations for Iran is a fluid approach to civilisation and tradition and how society should deal

¹¹⁷Shabnam Holliday and Paola Rivetti, 'Divided we stand? The heterogeneous political identities of Iran's 2009–2010 uprisings', in Shabnam Holliday and Phillip Leech (eds), *Political Identities and Popular Uprisings in the Middle East* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), pp. 17–36.

¹¹⁸Mohammad Khatami, 'Iran: This time, the West must not turn its back on diplomacy', *The Guardian* (23 September 2013).

¹¹⁹Hassan Rouhani, *matn-e kâmel-e sokhnân-e doctor rouhâni dar shastohashtomin majma'-e omumi-ye sâzaman-e melal-e motahed*, September 2013, available at: {<https://www.president.ir/fa/71572>}.

¹²⁰Hassan Rouhani, 'rais-e jomhuri dar jam'è-ye sarân-e keshvarha-ye ozv-e sâzaman-e melal-e motahed', September 2017, available at: {<https://president.ir/fa/100835>}.

¹²¹'At UN, Iran proposes "coalition for hope" to pull Gulf region from "edge of collapse"', 9 September 2019, available at: {<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1047472>}.

¹²²Abtahi: beh raghm-e mokâtab-e-ye khâtami bâ rahbari, khaste-ha-ye mowred-e tavajoh-e hâkemiyyat gharar nagerefteh ast', *Radio Farda*, November 2022, available at: {<https://www.radiofarda.com/a/khatami-letter-iran-leader/32148051.html>}.

¹²³Mohammad Khatami, *Islam, Liberty, and Development* (New York: Global Academic Publishing, 1998), pp. 18, 29, 34.

with these dynamics.¹²⁴ While culture is defined as ‘the collection of rooted beliefs’ and ‘as habits of thought and emotion in society’,¹²⁵ civilisation is ‘the material aspects of social life and all institutions and organization that acts as political, economic, industrial and other frameworks for social organization’.¹²⁶ Regarding the relationship between the two, ‘civilization is the basis and foundation of a culture’,¹²⁷ and ‘tradition comprises the habituated thoughts, beliefs, and deeds of a people, that have been institutionalized in society based on past practices’.¹²⁸ ‘Tradition’, therefore, is ‘the existing culture in a society that has once possessed a compatible civilization’.¹²⁹

How Khatami sees civilisation, culture, tradition, and modernity interacting with each other demonstrates inherent fluidity. He has a willingness to engage with not only the past, but also with norms and values that he views as being from another civilisation. In terms of the former, Khatami states that ‘a culture that is adapted to a civilization can endure in people’s lives long after the demise of that civilization’.¹³⁰ In other words, tradition can remain a part of a society’s culture even if its former civilisation is no longer dominant or present. Consequently, society needs to bring together the positive aspects of both ‘tradition’ and/or the previous civilisation(s) and another civilisation, and even embark on creating a new relevant civilisation.¹³¹ Thus, Dialogue among Civilisations is a framework for dealing with a society’s or state’s social and political change, which draws on previous and new civilisations while maintaining authenticity and legitimacy. In Iran’s particular case, this means a dialogue with *Irāniyat* (previous) and Western civilisation (new).

Crucially, Khatami’s approach shows how Western civilisation is simultaneously seen as not only in terms of the historical and the contemporary, but as internal *and* external to Iran. For Khatami, ‘modern Western civilization’ is not to be confused with ‘Christian civilization of the Middle Ages’. While the former is associated with the Enlightenment and nature and humans being central to the modern world, the latter is seen in terms of ‘God and religion’.¹³² Certainly, this demonstrates the legacy of European imperial knowledge. Importantly, however, Khatami is intent on showing appreciation of what he considers the ‘achievements of Western civilization’, namely ‘modern science, technology, freedom of thought, and democracy’. Khatami is also keen to highlight ‘the colonialism of Western civilization’, which involves ‘the use of deadly force against non-Westerners, the plunder of other peoples’ material and cultural riches, polluting the earth’s environment, perpetuating half-truths and lies, and the opportunism that also characterize the West’.¹³³ For Khatami, this is both historically and in the present.

Western civilisation is external in that Khatami sees it as the culture and civilisation that dominates the globe. For instance, Khatami states that ‘today’s world is Western in its orientation, techniques, and thoughts such that even if one lives outside the geographic boundaries of the West, one must incorporate the West into one’s values and life’.¹³⁴ However, Western civilisation is simultaneously internal because of its colonial legacy. This is evident in his reflection on Iran’s political history. Here, Khatami equates domestic dictatorship and authoritarianism (the Pahlavi political order) with the West (colonial power). Khatami argues that during the past 200 years Iran encountered ‘authoritarianism and dictatorship of a more dangerous and destructive character that took over our society’¹³⁵ through widespread colonialism. This, according to Khatami,

¹²⁴Ibid., pp. 34–36.

¹²⁵Ibid., p. 83.

¹²⁶Khatami, ‘The Islamic world and modern challenges’, p. 40.

¹²⁷Khatami, *Islam, Liberty, and Development*, p. 83.

¹²⁸Ibid., p. 19.

¹²⁹Ibid., p. 20.

¹³⁰Ibid., p. 83.

¹³¹Ibid., pp. 67–8.

¹³²Ibid., p. 22.

¹³³Ibid., p. 32.

¹³⁴Ibid., p. 82.

¹³⁵Ibid., pp. 11–12.

afflicted Iran ‘with a colonialism-dependent dictatorship’ that ‘was dependent on protecting the interests of a global colonist’ by means of robbing Iran’s ‘material and spiritual resources’. Thus, it is also authoritarianism, rather than just democracy, that is associated with the West.

For Khatami, the dilemma, therefore, that post-colonial Muslim societies face is how to engage with the colonial power while maintaining a post-colonial authenticity. His discussion highlights how Western civilisation is integral to post-colonial politics. Khatami critiques two extant approaches. On the one hand, there are ‘traditionalists’ who have not been able to provide ‘society with tools to appraise Western civilization properly’.¹³⁶ On the other, there are those who have a ‘complete and uncritical adopting of modern values’. This approach is considered a failure because it is unable to reach out to ‘people who have become habituated to tradition’.¹³⁷ Nor has it been able to disentangle itself from autocracy and being the ‘the tools of Western colonialism’.¹³⁸ Thus, Khatami argues that Iran must decide where to ‘stand in relation to the West’ while maintaining Iran’s national identity.¹³⁹

His response to this post-colonial condition, particularly in Muslim societies, is a third approach, namely Reformism, or ‘real Islam’.¹⁴⁰ For Khatami, Islam of ‘reform-minded thinkers in the developing world’ is the ‘real Islam, as opposed to the ‘regressive’ Islam of the traditionalists and ‘dogmatic clerics’, or a ‘diluted Islam’ that does not have ‘real knowledge of Islam’.¹⁴¹ ‘Diluted Islam’ opens Iran to the greatest risk of the ‘West’s cultural onslaught’. Reformism, however, involves a dialogue between both tradition and modernity; and between civilisation of the past and that of the present (Western civilisation), which is seen to dominate the world.¹⁴² Thus, Reformism is itself a dialogue of civilisations. Its authenticity is preserved because it involves ‘a return to the self and reviving our historical-cultural identity’ and ‘a positive encounter with the achievements of human civilization, while being aware of the hegemonic and colonial legacy of the West’.¹⁴³

As noted, integral to Khatami’s Reformism is the idea of Islamic democracy as a dialogue between Islamic civilisation and Western civilisation. Khatami’s Islamic democracy drew on Soroush and other religious intellectuals such as Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari and Mohsen Kadivar. This political thought involved their questioning of the ‘political Islam project’ and debates on the ‘sovereignty of religious values by means of the sovereignty of the people (religious democratic government)’; the ‘separation of religion from government (liberalism and secularism)’;¹⁴⁴ and ‘the role of power sharing, independent grassroots associations, political parties, the rule of law, and individual rights and freedom’ as supporters of civil society.¹⁴⁵ Eshkevari argued that ‘not only are Islam and democracy in the realm of state and government not incompatible, but, on the contrary, Muslim government cannot be undemocratic’.¹⁴⁶ Thus, Dialogue among Civilisations is acknowledging the way in which Western civilisation is integral to Iranian political culture because of the legacy of colonialism and embracing what are considered the positive aspects of Western civilisation, such as democracy.

In addition to debates regarding Western civilisation, there is also an affirmation that both *Irāniyat* and *Islāmiyat* are integral to Iranian political culture. This is evident in his construction

¹³⁶Ibid., p. 25.

¹³⁷Ibid., p. 26.

¹³⁸Ibid.

¹³⁹Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁴¹Ibid., pp. 117, 121–2.

¹⁴²Ibid., p. 122.

¹⁴³Ibid., pp. 26–7.

¹⁴⁴Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Richard Tapper, *Islam and Democracy in Iran: Eshkevari and the Quest for Reform* (London: IB Tauris, 2006), pp. 29, 35–6, 70–2, 156.

¹⁴⁵Mohsen Kadivar, ‘Reflection on the May 23 election’, *Salām* (17 August 1997), cited in Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), p. 252.

¹⁴⁶Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, *Islam and Democracy*, p. 86.

of Iranian national identity.¹⁴⁷ He argues that ‘there is still this wrong image that we have to split being Iranian from being Islamic’.¹⁴⁸ To this end, Khatami states:

Several times I have said that we must have dialogue with other civilizations and cultures, but before that we have to know what is this ‘we’ that we are. My answer ... is that our identity is Iranian-Islamic. We take pride in being Iranian. Of course, there have been many struggles, and possibly there is still this wrong image that we have to split being Iranian from being Islamic. On the one hand, people have said that we must focus on Islam and take away being Iranian; on the other hand, many have called for that in order to be Iranian we must take away Islam. Both these are a mistake and a digression from the true way.¹⁴⁹

This extract is taken from a speech to inaugurate an Iranian television network, seven months after his election. It is a clear demonstration of the contention, illustrated above, that a culture can remain even if the time of the civilisation, such as Iran’s pre-Islamic civilisation, has passed. Notably, this dialogue between *Irānīyat* and *Islāmiyat* played a significant role in building bridges with Iran’s youth and diaspora.¹⁵⁰ It is evident, therefore, that Dialogue among Civilisations is not simply associated with world order. It is also about creating an authentic post-colonial political project that has to engage with *Irānīyat*, *Islāmiyat*, and Western civilisation. For Khatami, this not only enables Iran’s engagement with the world, but also a domestic political project that in his mind has legitimacy.

Conclusion

This article offers a revisiting of Khatami’s Dialogue among Civilisations in light of debates about how to achieve a non-Eurocentric IR and address the West/non-West dichotomisation that is based on the idea that the West is distinctly different from the non-West. Through a close examination of Khatami’s intellectual and political background, we have illustrated how Dialogue among Civilisations needs to be understood not only in the context of agency to engage with Western political thought and Islamic philosophy, but also Iran’s multifaceted and complex heritages and political development. This includes those that pre-date European colonialism. To this end, our approach contributes to a more inclusive IR that is not based on essentialist assumptions regarding the ‘West’ and ‘the rest’.

Furthermore, this article demonstrates how, despite Iran never having been formally colonised, Khatami’s Dialogue among Civilisations was simultaneously a post-colonial domestic political project *and* an aspiration for world order and Iranian foreign policy. This was articulated in the context of an international environment that was perceived to be dominated by Western hegemony and the legacy of European colonialism. It is at these intersections, where context and case meet theoretical development and application, that further work can be done to explore how such alternative conceptions of world order and international relations can contribute to the development of a non-Eurocentric IR. Our examination transcends the static West/non-West categorisations in IR and accepts the agency to embrace and draw from multiple intellectual heritages simultaneously.

This piece therefore offers some of the rich contextualisation that is needed when seeking to integrate hitherto under-represented voices and approaches in IR. Exploring how Khatami situated his calls for a Dialogue among Civilisations within what he considers a post-colonial context helps illustrate the necessity for offering deep, context-specific analyses that can contribute to the wider aims of a Global IR project. The contribution is important for a discipline that seeks to move

¹⁴⁷ Holliday, *Defining Iran*, p. 106.

¹⁴⁸ Mohammad Khatami, ‘Hoviyat-e Irāni-Eslāmi’, in Mohammad Khatami (ed.), *Eslām, Rowhānīyat va Enqelāb-e Eslāmi* (Tehran: Tarh-e Now, 1377 [1998]), pp. 60–6 (pp. 61–2).

¹⁴⁹ Mohammad Khatami, ‘Farhang-e Irāni-Eslāmi’, in Mohammad Khatami (ed.), *Eslām, Rowhānīyat va Enqelāb-e Eslāmi* (Tehran: Tarh-e Now, 1377 [1998]), pp. 17–20 (p. 18).

¹⁵⁰ Holliday, *Defining Iran*.

beyond its Eurocentric roots towards being more inclusive. It shows how alternative conceptions of the international challenge many of the assumptions of scholarship not only on Iran but in IR more broadly. Finally, the analysis illustrates how a concept such as Dialogue among Civilisations has both a practical application and a theoretical contribution to make and therefore remains of continued salience to our understanding of global politics and the international.

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