Mohammad Khatami’s dialogue of civilizations is an alternative both to the old militant jihadist rhetoric and to uncritical dependence on the West (what some have termed “westoxication”). In contrast to the hard-line position of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Khomeini’s successor as Supreme Guide of the Islamic republic, Khatami boldly asserts that Islamic reform, open to a dynamic interaction with Western civilization, must build a bridge between tradition and modernity:

We must concede that the incompatibility of modern civilization with our tradition-bound civilization is one of the most important causes of the crisis in our society. What is to be done? Should we insist on remaining immersed in our tradition, or should we melt fully into Western civilization? Or is there another way of removing this contradiction?  

Khatami’s vision of the history and development of civilizations is dynamic; civilizations constantly change and evolve. The West is the latest, but not the ultimate human civilization, which like all other human artefacts, is tentative and susceptible to decay. . . . Civilizations change and there is no such thing as an ultimate and eternal civilization.  

Khatami believes that at the beginning of the twenty-first century the need is for the creation of a new civilization. However, his call for dialogue must be seen within the context of his particular worldview, which differs from that of many in America and Europe. Many in the West assume that dialogue with the West means that eventually non-Western peoples will see the advantages of Western civilization and become more westernized. This would be a complete misunderstanding of Khatami’s vision of dialogue, which is not a passive policy of accommodation but a competitive strategy for strengthening and transforming Islamic civilization. It transcends a militant vision of jihad and offers a way to avoid destructive conflict. Dialogue with the West is an important way of strengthening Islam. Khatami’s vision holds out the hope that, as the West evolves and possibly declines, Islam will regain its position as the leading progressive world civilization.

In the continued encounter of Islam and the West in the twenty-first century, Khatami’s dialogue of civilizations reflects a significant perspective very different from that of both Western analysts such as Samuel Huntington and old-style Islamic advocates of militant jihad such as Sayyid Qutb and, more recently, Osama bin Laden.

ABDURRAHMAN WAHID: COSMOPOLITAN ISLAM AND GLOBAL DIVERSITY

In October 1999, Abdurrahman Wahid, leader of the Nahdatul Ulama, (Renaissance of Religious Scholars), the biggest (35 million members) Islamic organization in the world’s largest Muslim country, became the first elected president in Indonesia’s history. Wahid, however, is best described as a modern, urban, liberal Muslim intellectual. As a religious leader and social and political reformer, he has staunchly opposed those who would reassert Islam’s role in politics and has warned of the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism.

Bridging the worlds of traditional Islam and modern thought, Wahid espouses a reformist intellectual synthesis and social agenda that distinguishes between unchanging religious doctrines or laws and those that can be altered to accommodate social change. Wahid is among a generation of reformers who advocate a progressive Islam, one that is inclusive, democratic, pluralistic, and tolerant. Wahid advocates a cosmopolitan Islam, the product of creative reinterpretation or reformulation, responsive to the demands of modern life and reflecting Indonesian Islam’s diverse religious and ethnic history and communities.