Human Rights in a Cultural Impasse

Dr Hans J Roth, former Swiss Ambassador for transborder cooperation with neighbouring countries, now at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Geneva, and author on multicultural topics.

The speaker will show that human rights as defined in the Universal Declaration are rights derived from a Western understanding of the relation between person and community. The West, however, no longer dominates world ethics and politics in an undisputed way. Its human rights view will get under pressure from other cultural views and is in a clear impasse today. How could we get out of this dead-end and how would a more generally valid human rights base look like?

1. Any person is in a constant equilibrium of tension between self-realization and social integration.

2. There are basically two social modes. In the first the person is integrated in his group, in the second it has detached itself from it.

3. There are some grey shades in this integration possible, but it is restricted to these two modes by physical factors of perception.

4. Perception of the natural and social environment is a key component of culture. It is essentially marked by perception horizons.

5. Proximity allows working with all the senses, distance is reducing perception to seeing and hearing.

6. The differentiation is important, because human rights have been developed on a Western, detached background. We speak of the dignity of the person, never of the dignity of the group.

7. Western (and male) detachment allows analysis and abstraction and the development of absolute values. It forms the background to binary logic. It sees reality in a static way and is interested only in information relevant to the actual challenge.

8. Proximity works with all the senses and is therefore the reason for a holistic understanding of reality that is in constant flow. It contradicts binary logic directly by including emotions in reasoning and allows unity of contradictions that is excluded in Western binary logic.

9. In the sense of a Gauss normal distribution holistic understanding is represented by non-European civilizations and by women. Both are much better integrated in society than Western persons (Western women included) and men.

10. Western domination led to a Universal Declaration of Human Rights that is very Western and very masculine. If we ask for a declaration of the other side, it would probably be a mirror version of the existing one.

11. How can we thus get out of the cultural impasse of human rights in the 21st century?