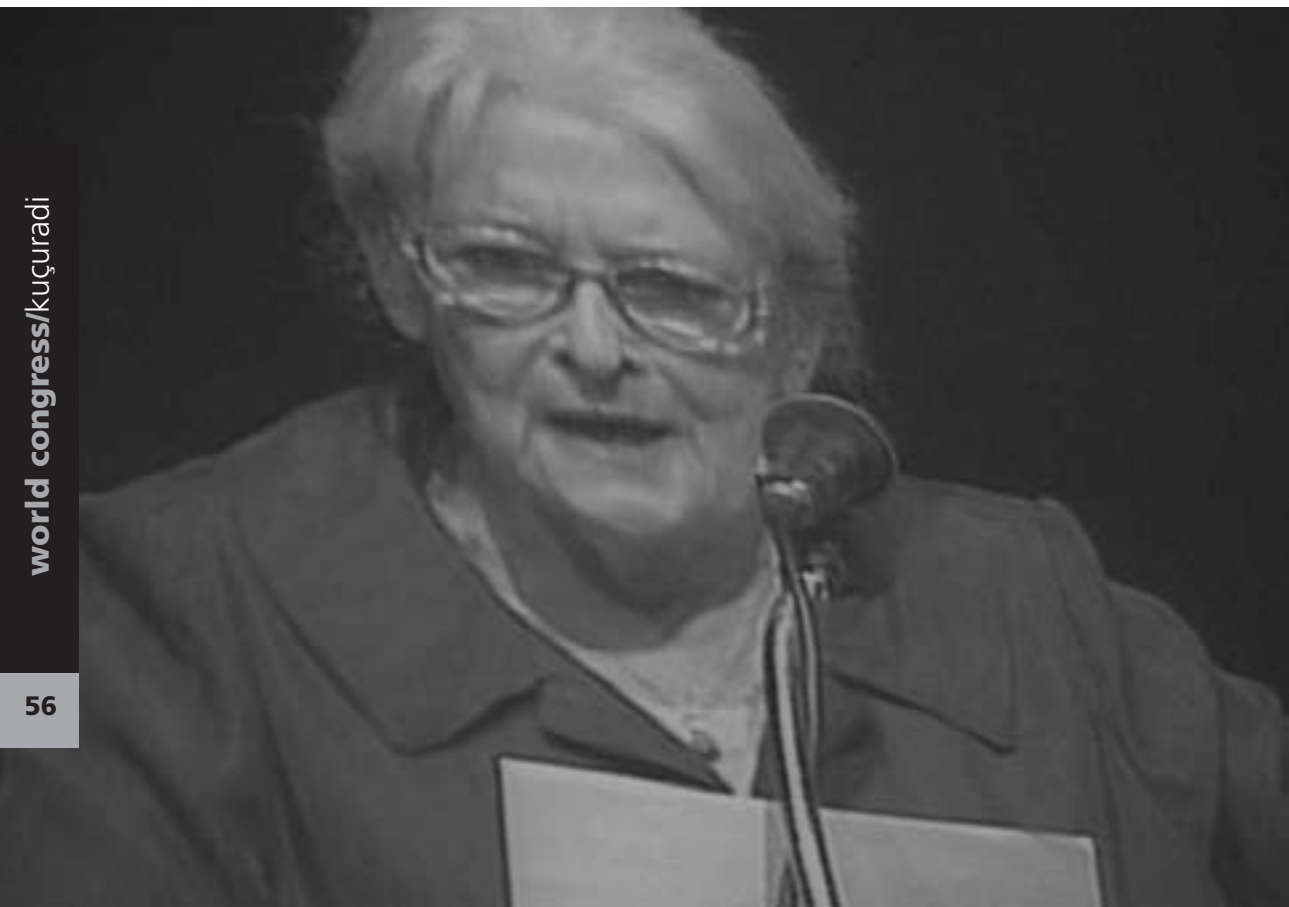


The activist president

world congress/kuçuradi

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IOANNA KUÇURADI ON THE MARRIAGE OF RIGOUR AND OPENNESS

How you can respect a culture with blood feuds? A culture with polygamy? It's not possible. You can be rightly against something or wrongly against it, but if you are against something, you cannot respect it. If you say that you respect it, it would be hypocritical.

Recent world congresses have often talked about “Philosophy Facing World Problems”, as the theme of the 2003 Istanbul meeting put it. But although the subject has talked the talk, there are reasons to doubt it has always walked the walk.

Such scepticism, however, would be entirely misplaced if applied to the pre-eminent figure in the International Federation of Philosophical Societies (FISP) over the last twenty years. Ioanna Kuçuradi served as secretary general of FISP for ten years, and then as president from 1998-2003. But before, during, and after her time leading the federation, she has maintained a constant interest in the study and promotion of human rights.

Kuçuradi believes that not enough attention is paid to the ethical side of human rights, which is, she told me, “the basis of what is common in all of us.” This commonality, however, is undermined by a misguided desire to make the respecting of difference a cardinal virtue. “Because people are discriminated against because of their cultures and so on, to avoid this we create another way, and so try to correct an error by committing another error.”

Such respect is not only misguided, but impossible. “How you can respect a culture with blood feuds? A culture with polygamy? It's not possible. You can be rightly against something

or wrongly against it, but if you are against something, you cannot respect it. If you say that you respect it, it would be hypocritical.” But what is true for cultures is not necessarily true of members of it. “The respect is for the person. I am very respectful to everybody from any culture.”

The key mistake is, as she put in her talk to the congress, that “We made pluralism a motto of our time, considering it to be a remedy against dogmatism, still without inquiring whether pluralism is epistemologically possible.”

The remark was provocative in the context, for surely if anything exemplified pluralism run riot, it was the world congress.

“What do you mean by pluralist?” she asked me, rhetorically. “I mean by pluralist to have philosophers from all the parts of the world. This is pluralist, not trying to consider world views as philosophy.”

This view pits her against more accommodating factions of FISP. For example, she was called on to give her blessing to a panel on Jainism (see p72) “I was sorry, but they insisted I said something. I said no, this is not philosophy. This is a world view and a way of life. It's a very good way of life, I have nothing against. But a true philosophy is not this.

“The job of the federation is to integrate philosophers from all parts of the world, not to

try to integrate into philosophy the world views of these parts of the world.”

In this respect, Kuçuradi is a classic Turkish secularist. “Ioanna is leery of the influence of religion on philosophy,” William McBride told me, “even though she herself is religious, from the Orthodox tradition. But she doesn’t let anybody know that.”

She is certainly more determined to keep religion and philosophy apart than many of her FISP colleagues. “People are pragmatic there. For example, we had a proposal from an Iranian society, and I was firmly against it.

“Now if you just look at the FISP newsletter, they start the report by saying ‘In the name of God’. I have nothing against people’s religion – they can be religious, but not start a philosophical report about philosophical activities with God. So I was against, and I said my concern. But the majority, they understand this as pluralism. I don’t think this is pluralism.”

Kuçuradi is critical of how this well-meaning pluralism ends up with an unsustainable relativism. In her talk, she said, “they [the world community] call those different labellings and explanations of the same situations ‘looking from different viewpoints’, and promote it, assuming that thus dogmatism could be avoided.” Is this the idea that people think one has to be relativistic in order to avoid dogmatism?

“Yes, but it’s not the case. In cases of knowledge, there is no relativity. If in this room there are 500 people or 509 people, there is no perspective. You can adapt your relativism, and say that perhaps you have made a mistake when calculating. People can talk like that. But there really is an object of knowledge, and we need

attention to reach the object and to follow with knowledge.”

This issue of attention, along with that of naming, is another idea that Kuçuradi has been promoting. She illustrated it in her talk with a passage from Plato’s *Meno*, in which Socrates tries to get Meno to say what “shape” is. The project requires that Meno both looks at the right aspect in shapes and then identifies it correctly. This “Socratic method of inquiry into the *noeta*, the products of the human mind”, she says, is “an attempt to find not any common characteristic, but only what is essentially the same in all those individual things and which makes it possible to call them by the same name.”

Her approach is interesting because it combines a commitment to the objective reality of knowledge with an emphasis on the role of human mind in creating objectifications of reality, two approaches which are often seen to be in conflict. The marriage of the two comes about by realising that truthful seeing requires that we actively attend to the right aspects of the phenomenon, and actively name it correctly.

As Kuçuradi says, “It’s not easy always to find the right place to look at, to speak about, in a given issue.” That is certainly true in ethical debates, especially those about her main concern, human rights. To take one example, “so-called freedom of expression in Europe. I find it very, very problematic. There is freedom of expression, but also freedom of thought or freedom of opinion, and if you take it separately, you can justify anything.

“I can give you an example. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights has been established in Vienna. Before it was the

European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia. In a bulletin that they published in connection with the Mohammed cartoons, they talked about the right to offend and the right not to be offended.

“So what does it mean, the right to offend? Then you can justify everything in the name of freedom of expression. But I say, in this case, we lose sight of the purpose of the human rights. Why work for human rights? In order to be free to offend you?”

This answer reflects the extent to which Kuçuradi always keeps in mind the purpose of philosophical disputes, and never enters into them purely for the sake of it. The teaching of human rights, for example, is of much more than theoretical interest in Turkey, and she is as much an activist as a professor.

In 1994 she was elected chair of the new High Advisory Council for Human Rights in Turkey, which went on to introduce the teaching of human rights in primary and secondary schools. It also spoke out for the abolition of the death penalty, torture and ill-treatment; and for the freedom of the press.

She also started Turkey's first MA programme in Human Rights at Hacettepe University, in Ankara. In her teaching, she says “Human rights are principles concerned with how we should treat people and how should we be treated. I say nobody should be subjected to torture, and that means that nobody shall torture. This emphasises the ethical side of human rights, which is taken into consideration very little.

“This is how I teach human rights to policemen for example. It's very interesting what happens. They are totally different after that, in

the most cases I have followed – I cannot follow everybody.”

Kuçuradi says she gets a lot of policemen on the course, and if it does indeed change how they think about rights, that surely has to be a good thing. “Now, I'm in another university in Istanbul. And just last week, the MA program was approved for this new university – a program of human rights. I will do the same thing in Istanbul.”

It occurs to me that Kuçuradi's approach strikes a balance that many find hard to achieve, between the values of openness, and the values of precision and commitment to truth. A lot of the time, people fall on one side. They embrace openness, for example, and as a result, they become too open.

“You see, they don't exclude each other, these two things,” she agrees. “If you know the objective side, you're immediately open. Sometimes you are obliged to do something that normally you wouldn't have done, if you see that this is an implication of the situation.”

Kuçuradi's balance in these areas is also exemplified by the fact that, although she vigorously opposes membership of FISP by religious bodies, she has been at the forefront of the organisation's opening up to emerging nations. For instance, she supported holding the 2008 congress in Korea, the first ever in Asia. But she says “I had to fight a little.” So why were some colleagues less enthusiastic?

“They said it was very far. Greece was also proposed and I said no, next time, please. Let's go to Asia, and if possible, on to Africa. All these people from here go to Europe and to America, and it's for them far. Let's be far for us.”

As usual, Kuçuradi was the one willing to go the extra mile.