Religion as the Source of Reconciliation among Civilizations

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Abstract

The problem of using the category of civilization in much of the social science literature is so obvious that it necessitates a philosophical definition. The heart of every civilization is its primordial tradition. The life of every civilization is tied to the well-being and operativeness of those religious truths that it upholds as sacred. When the religion dies, its civilization also dies. This paper points to the errant "clash of civilizations" thesis and argues that the seat of a universalist consensus cannot be modernity. Rather, it must be religious traditions. It further argues that resuscitating the western tradition is a prerequisite for reconciliation between Islamic societies and the West, and finally, that the ideology of globalism is the wrong milieu for finding such a common platform.

The Clash

This paper begins with a cautionary reference relating to the "clash of civilizations" thesis by Huntington. Huntington, in his ever-popular but very erroneous thesis of a clash of civilizations, is at least half right. He is quite on the mark in indicating that there is a clash, however, our inquiry shows that it is not between civilizations, but rather between civilizations and that entity which is against the ethos of civilization. There are many different ideas, across several disciplines, of what constitutes civilization. Often civilization is thought of as a world which reflects certain achievements relating to development of culture, language and literature, arts and architecture, technology and systems of administration, etc. These, in our opinion, are

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the manifestations or the *forms* of civilization whose *essences* lie hidden beneath the forms. Instead of defining civilization in positive terms, we find it useful to proceed with the discussion of civilization by knowing it *via negativa*, i.e., to know what civilization is not. We begin with the assumption that what Huntington means by civilization is not civilization.

Huntington defines civilizations as "cultures writ large."[1] Even though he talks about civilizations, he asserts that the central theme of his work is "culture and cultural identities,"[2] whose meaning he casts upon his concept of civilization. It is rather exigent that one unlearn his concept of civilization to find out what civilization really is, and secondly, if there is a clash, to ask what it is exactly that is destined to clash. Furthermore, the most surprising fact about Huntington's work is that he talks about the role of religion and its integrative function in the life of a civilization, yet at the same time he reduces religion to the level of culture and custom!

It is our conclusion that the core of every civilization is not culture but its *primordial tradition*.[3] The life of that entity which we can call *civilization* is tied to its worldview, which emerges from those answers that its religion gives to the existential predicament of humanity. Cultures are the realms of shared meanings and shared understanding through the use of mutually comprehensible language and symbols. However, they evolve and gravitate around the primordial tradition. Whereas the former is subject to change, the latter is a repository of those principles and has a timeless value. Therefore, several systems of culture can be well integrated into a larger civilizational whole to which they belong, and the cohesive element that unites them together in spirit also allows the plurality of their outer forms to exist. It is that element which is universal and the one that can serve as a platform for reconciliation at the local as well as the universal level.

Before civilizations can embark upon the task of an inter-civilizational dialogue, different systems of cultures within them must have an intra-civilizational dialogue that allows them to recognize each other's differences *within* a civilization, and expresses the willingness to live with each other. Only after the acceptance of diversity *within* a civilization can the people of that civilization be open to talking to the people of other civilizations. Because such an internal dialogue is not resolved in the West, a dialogue with others seems intricate. Only when the European civilization comes to terms with its own religious tradition can it understand and come to respect other religious traditions.

It must also be known that the basis for intra- or inter-civilizational talk must be *unity* and not *uniformity*. In any civilization, although diverse cul-

tures coexist with each other, they are unified in one whole via a religious *weltanschauung*. Modernity,[4] on the other hand, can be identified with that process which seeks uniformity as a way to resolve conflict among people. This phenomenon is as visible as daylight if one observes how the process of state-making took place in Europe and how the nation-state is, by its very nature, the enemy of diversity, and therefore, of universality.

Even the process that aims to roll back the nation-state in Europe has a uniformist political agenda and not a unitarian one. Any force that unites people in isolation from their primordial beliefs, which sustain humanity's spirit, must be hegemonic. Yet the only way to unite people is to unite them in spirit. True believers can respect other religious forms only because they, too, are created by the single Creator and their mutilation amounts to an insult to God. This necessitates taking into consideration the transcendental unity of all primordial beliefs.

Unity as a principle resides in its perfection with the Divine Grace but serves as the ideal for God's vicegerent on Earth. The principle of unity can bind people within an area because of the humanity they have in common. This principle allows people from outside of their acumen to understand and respect each other. But what must one do if a certain entity is interested in knowing the others after jettisoning those principles that constituted the core of their primordial tradition? Since such an entity in our view does not qualify to be called a civilization, there cannot be a dialogue.

It is important to see how the modern world deviated from its traditional way of life, and how modernity cannot be adequately classified as a civilization. Civilizations can be identified by race or ethnicities (e.g., Chinese and Indian), by religion (e.g., Islamic), or by geography (e.g., African or European).[5] All such categories of identifying a civilization are linked to a certain worldview that is imparted to the people of that civilization by its religious moorings.

The recent history of modern Europe is an exception to that rule, for:

> There is no phenomenon of modernity in the orbit of any other civilization, in the specific sense in which we understand it, that is, a scientific, secularized ("disenchanted or "desacralized") and, consequently, materialistic culture, centered around the dominant idea of the individual.[6]

Given this break from what we consider to be civilization, it becomes even more difficult to ponder upon possibilities of a dialogue because:

> if modernity as a civilizational form is applied to the entire world arena, it is precisely because of the contemporary phenomenon of a new type of hegemony, the results of which are crystallized through globalization.[7]

As a matter of fact, most civilizations before the advent of modernity can be called civilizations because their civilizational trajectory was centripetal in relation to religion; whereas what we call *modern civilization*, or technically *un-civilization*, is hopelessly centrifugal in relation to its primordial center. The contemporary western culture/or the former Christian civilization of the West is the only one which, according to its own celebrated principles of humanism and secularism, has consciously moved away from its center. Thus the spread of *un-civilization* around the world and its attendant military and intellectual assault on the traditional civilizations is a movement which can be quite accurately called anti-civilization.

The Role of Religion in the Life of a Civilization

The role of religion in the life of a civilization can be understood quite well from Wittgenstein's famous quotes that "the sense of the world must lie outside of the world," and "the solution to the riddle of life in space and time lies outside of space and time."[8] All cultures except the modern western culture are centered around a religious or transcendental/metaphysical core.[9] Religion alone, besides language and culture, provides an ontological and cosmic framework that helps weave those cultures into a single civilization. The most striking feature of the western European civilization is its discontinuity from the ways of the past, rather than the continuity of the primordial tradition as in most other civilizations.[10]

Even at the earliest times in recorded history, we know how the civilization of Greece died when the Orphic religion was replaced by the Olympian religion. When the primordial religious tradition died, the civilization died. The present situation in the formerly Christian West is somewhat similar. No entity has been militarily so strong in the history of humanity, still it always talks of the deterioration of security. It cannot realize that the threat is from within itself and not outside, the threat of having lost the primordial center which is the life of a civilization and which provides security.

One of the crucial functions of religion is to secure the moral guidance of believers in this life. The transcendent core of culture gave sense to the vicissitudes of life; it explained, gave meaning to, and assigned a role and a permanent value to all occurrences in the physical world, society, and individual lives.[11] Because religion is concerned with the real, its cosmology and ontology include all that is physical as well as spiritual. It addresses the things we can see and also the things we cannot see. Due to this cosmology, man is situated in the universe as a higher being (instead of an accident of

evolution) and is appropriately a part of nature, and therefore, integrated into the global whole.

Yet another deeper factor that prevents a dialogue between religious and non-religious worlds is the philosophical assumptions upon which modern thought rests and their ramifications for those who choose to live life according to their religious tenets. Modernity gives us a picture of the origin of humanity through evolution, coupled with a belief in linear progress, which is utopian. If today is better than yesterday, and tomorrow will be better than today, one gets caught up in a utopian trap which is at once teleological and futuristic, but imprisoned to the immanence of this world. The moment of perfection resides in the future and not in the origin. Religious eschatology, on the other hand, addresses the phenomenon of the afterlife and death, and its moment of *telos* is not in this world but in the transcendental world. "[Modern science is] limited to efforts aimed at understanding the physical world in which we live. It cannot be teleological but only teleonomic."[12]

Every civilization has its own trajectory of development which reflects its people's aptitude and tendency. This also accounts for their difference; however, this difference does not imply opposition. Such is the case with all civilizations that can be considered normal, or traditional.[13] All such civilizations are based upon certain principles, and the difference between them lies in the extent to which they vary from those transcendent principles. Such divergences are mostly superficial and external, and the unity of these civilizations remains intact because of their adherence to those principles.

The common denominator between such civilizations is the affirmation of these principles. However, only the modern western world is based upon the negation of those principles. This is one of the chief factors that prohibits it from having an understanding with those civilizations that have religious origin:

> [I]f such understanding is to go at all deep and operate efficaciously, it must first be established at the top, that is to say through those very principles which this abnormal and aberrant [civilization] lacks. In the present state of the world, therefore, we have, on the one hand, all those civilizations that have remained faithful to the traditional standpoint, namely those of the non-West, and, on the other hand, a specifically anti-traditional civilization, that of the modern West.[14]

Besides wars and the usual political tensions in the history of humanity, no anxiety existed between the traditional civilizations. The new opposition of the "West against the rest" only took significance upon the emergence of

the modern West, because medieval western civilization was comparable to other traditional civilizations in those days, as the traditional civilizations of today are comparable to each other. In such an atmosphere, a dialogue, trialogue or conference of civilizations would indeed have been a possibility. But it is not a possibility for the contemporary mentality, which is hostile to the idea of civilization.

Dialogue of Civilizations in the Age of Globalism

All world systems, cultures and civilizations, except modern culture, are imbued with and reflect certain principles whose source is ultimately transcendent. Only the ideology of modernism stands apart from the rest. Modern cultures, whether western/liberal or eastern/socialist, are particularistic because they lack a connection to their primordial center, and it is precisely this break from the past which characterizes them as overly rational, anti-religious, and anti-universal. Ironically, it is only this section of contemporary humanity that often speaks about the need for dialogue, interfaith understanding, and reconciliation.

In the era of globalization, with its associated ideology of globalism, the modern world is no longer a geographical entity restricted to the West. It has permeated through the vestiges of traditional societies and, with its seductive and misleading luciferan impulse, it now threatens their existence to the core. In the past, the process of modernity has destroyed the equilibrium of the traditional societies and continues to threaten the very existence of the world, unless this force is recognized as harmful, which in our opinion is only possible from within a world that has some idea of what is universal.

On the one hand, it holds that the material progress of the West is normatively superior to the rest of the world, which is a result of the particular constellation of historical events; (thus modernity as process from inside out is no longer available to others).On the other hand, it champions itself to be the model for *backward societies* to emulate. It is like telling those *third worlders* that "You can never become like us, however, we would still like you to try and see if you can!" Therefore, it is ever eager to export its technology and ideological appeal to the non-West. It has historically, exported imperialism and also nationalism, communism, and capitalism; and to combat the consequences of such divisiveness and particularisms, it has also exported arms and ammunition (along with antibiotics) to disrupt the balance of the non-West. Lately, it is busy exporting all of the above (in the

name of "national interest") in the form of globalism and democracy, as unalloyed goods and achievements of modernity.

All of the things the ascendant power within the West is championing can only become universal

> [I]f and only if, humankind is westernized as a whole ... by replacing all other cultural traditions and worldviews, through a mental revolution in the orbits of every civilization until its final conquest of the whole world.[15]

The ideology of globalism that the West talks about is no more than a dogma and it is only superficially understood as "universalism." It is actually the antithesis of true universality, because true universality can only result from a genuine desire to understand the other as the other understands himself. Finally, "globalization is one aspect of the extension of control over the world – world culture, world economy, world organizations, etc., – of any of the actual aspirant political and economic powerholders."[16]

Islam and Modernity: Clash or Dialogue?

The clash of civilizations is most visible between the former European civilization and the Islamic civilization. Until the rise of Marxism, Islam had been the only world movement of which the West had been afraid.[17] Now that Marxism is dead, the West is focused on Islam once again. Politically, the Muslims are ever afraid of the West which can pound as much iron on them as it likes, whenever it wants, but despite the colonial and post-colonial European domination of Muslim lands, Islam continues to be the only religion that is a serious challenger to Christianity, as it continues to grow even within the West. This phenomenon makes it even more exigent from the Muslim point of view that conflict resolution must take place so that Muslims themselves can feel secure, whether they live politically and military dominated within their own lands or vilified by the western media within the West.

The challenge to inter-civilizational rapprochement is not religion but secular liberalism – this is the fashion of the day – that sees religion as a fallacy of the past separated from most of the culture and especially divorced from politics, economics and law.[18] In the Muslim world, the spheres of politics, society, law and economy have been morally informed by the divine injunctions as revealed in the Qur'an and Sunnah. The western liberals, on the other hand, are proud of their secularism and deny that they are caught up in any religious debates and pose to be religion-neutral. However, their heritage of animosity with Islam still colors their perceptions unwittingly.[19] The reason why most traditionalists, especially Mus-

lims, will not engage with liberals seeking a pseudo-dialogue, is because they question what there is to learn from those whose vanity is embedded in material progress, scientism, technicalism, and nationalism, and which has resulted in pollution of Earth, a deadly arms race, and the stark possibility of a nuclear winter.[20]

The degeneration of the unity of western civilization into an anti-civilizational world power was imminent from the very beginning of modern history, and it was precisely this anti-unitarian aspect of the West that put it on a collision course with Islamic civilization. Smith says that:

> Western civilization is dual, one part of its inheritance coming from Greece and Rome, the other from Palestine. The two have proceeded sometimes in conflict, sometimes in harmony, sometimes juxtaposed, but never fused ... [whereas] the Islamic civilization is unitary, not dual.[21]

The principle of unity, which is most essential in realizing universalism, is without exception embedded somewhere or other in all the primordial traditions. *Tawhid*, or oneness, is especially pivotal in the case of Islam, outlining the Muslim societies' worldview, education, and arts. There is no dialogue between Islam and the secular modern West; however, there is a possibility of dialogue between Islamic and Christian traditions. The role of the West is crucial in defeating the particularistic anti-civilization in order to resuscitate the primordial civilization of the West and to restore the environment, which can be conducive to the ethos of universalism so that the life of other civilizations can be sustained.

Muslims are still Muslims in a sense that Christians are not Christians anymore. This seriously hampers the possibility of deeper understanding, because of the relegation of Christianity from the center to the periphery in the secular West. It is a particularly difficult situation, because so many different sects of Christianity that were truly Christian in the recent past have given in to the forces of modernism. The disunity and fragmentation within the Church into what it does not ordain (gay and lesbian churches, separate churches for black and white or rich and poor) is something that goes against the ethos of Christian universalism. The Unitarian church, for example, even allows atheists to become church members and be a part of its congregation! Giving non-believers a chance to listen to God's message is one thing, but accepting their money (and therefore, democratic accommodation of their opinion) is totally another.

Just as there are impediments to dialogue in the West, there are the Uncle Toms of the contemporary East, i.e., the modernists who value hav-

ing a selective dialogue with the almighty West. Most of them also happen to be the darlings of the secular western establishments. The position of these easterners (often the ruling elite from the formerly colonized nations) is perhaps the most pathetic. They are in awe of the West and often see themselves through the eyes of the West's progress, and based on that negative self-image and inferiority complex vis-à-vis the West, they make suggestions of eclecticism and selection. They want to mimic the West and dream to become like it, so they will support those reforms that claim to put them on the path of "progress." They cannot fathom the impossibility of this task because all those little things we superficially consider good in the modern world are attached to a pattern, and piece by piece they bring in all the other necessary pre-requisites for that which at first seemed good, until the point where escaping the whole structure becomes next to impossible.[22] The traditional Islamic world is an organic whole, a *gestalt*, which is interconnected, and just grafting the shoot to the root will not make a difference.

Technicalism and scientism, with its hostility to the sacred, which has replaced the primordial and the religious, makes reconciliation difficult between modernity and tradition. The technical and scientific mind, disdains all other forms of human existence, but the progressivist one, has become the arbiter of all other forms of human mind, and of all other dimensions of the human being's essence and world in general.[23] Outside of this new sacred domain of technicalism, everything else is considered normatively inferior and unacceptable. Such are the *a priori* preconditions in the minds of those who are so eager to talk to the worlds other than their own.

This leads Muslims to believe that the anti-civilizational forces that colonized the Muslims are still at work, with the only difference that the western masses are now more than ever brainwashed by state propaganda. Injustice has been around for a very long time; however, how black is turned into white in front of the eyes of people who are led to belief in the falseness of media is totally new.

There can be a dialogue between Christianity and Islam, but not between Islam and the West, even though Islam itself has been a part of western heritage and continues to grow within the West. The case of those Muslims who continue having a dialogue with the liberal West by virtue of living there is also an inconclusive experiment that began after the Jewish holocaust. Since then Muslims have seen what can happen to them in cases like the Gulf War, Bosnia, Kosovo and Chechnya. Western Europe's silence and embargo upon the Muslims' plight as they were broken down by gang

rapes, infant rape, and mass extermination is living proof that the modern world is still haunted by the forces of anti-civilization.

Conclusion

The logic of the Enlightenment holds the European way of life superior to the rest of the "barbaric and backward" world because of its belief in progress as opposed to the static traditional life of the non-western world. The enlightenment mood is primarily responsible for social and political policies around the world that consider development normatively superior to under-development (even though it is primarily over-development that has brought humanity to the brink of ecological disaster). In fact, economic growth and the ideology of industrialism is privileged over sustainable agrarian economies (even though the fetish of economic growth is the enemy of sustainability and balance), while procedural democracy is privileged over benevolent monarchies (even if it contributes to degradation of moral values and brings about the tyranny of the masses). Because of modernism's diametrical opposition to the traditional worldview, a dialogue is not possible. There is an exploitative push in the civilized world, by the forces of anti-civilization, which must stop if we are to promote an environment that is conducive to mutual respect and understanding.

It must be asked how a dialogue is possible between entities who are not at parity with each other in terms of power. On the one hand, it is that entity which can be rightly called a civilization, yet on the other hand, you have a force antagonistic to civilization, and it is the latter which is ruling strong and also insists upon a dialogue. Given the fact that the traditional civilizations have already suffered enormous torture at the hands of the uncivilization, how can that gesture of dialogue be even taken with credibility? The modern West in the very recent past has attempted to destroy the unity of traditional civilizations around the world; how does it even have the nerve to propose a dialogue with the world which is often portrayed as the enemy in their societies, from the works of policy-making pundits to the fantasies of Hollywood?

The Huntingtons, Fukuyamas, Brzezinskis, Kissingers, and other policy hawks of the modern West offer little guidance to understanding what is beneath the clash of civilizations, but more so, they are *preparing* and *orchestrating* their world for a clash of civilizations. It is ironic that these people are writing in the defense of the modern West as if it was an endangered entity from outside. It is the modern world that threatens to overrun

what remains of the traditional world and not vice-versa. It is the traditional civilizations and the traditional cultures that are in fact endangered entities of today akin to many species from the plant and animal kingdom that are becoming extinct due to the encroachment of the modern way of life onto the world of balance and subsistence.

Finally, a word must be said about the idea of toleration, as it has become a buzz-word and a truism which is taken as something intrinsically good in the jingoism that surrounds the discussions of dialogues and reconciliation. Toleration or tolerance, in and of itself, is not necessarily good. We often speak of tolerating this and tolerating that, and that the gospel leads one to believe that tolerating is a virtue in itself.

It must be understood that one tolerates only that which is essentially undesirable, but not so much that one reacts against it. What is really important is *acceptance* and not *toleration*. One tolerates one's enemies but accepts the friends. Since acceptance can only come from understanding, acceptance of the other's religion and civilization can only come about from the understanding of the other's religion and civilization. Only if one accepts the other's religion to be valid (which can only happen if you understand it), can one further the idea of reconciliation among religions, and therefore, among civilizations. If one does not make an attempt to understand religion, nor make any attempt to accept it, but one merely talks of tolerating the "unwanted," it is most probable that the toleration will reach its limits sooner or later, and a clash based on misunderstanding and unacceptance will result.

NOTES

1. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 41.
2. Ibid., p. 20.
3. Traditional non-European languages do not use the term *tradition*. Most of the non-modern world at the dawn of the modern age lived within it and what was non-tradition was not known. As the fish can only know water if it knows something other than water (a medium in which it cannot survive). Therefore a term for tradition in the same sense as it was devised in the West while sidestepping it, was never devised outside of the secular West. Eastern languages therefore do not have an exact term corresponding to Tradition. Terms such as the Hindu and Buddhist *Dharma*, the Islamic *al-Din* and the Taoist *Tao* are related to the term tradition but are not really its identical counterparts. By tradition here, we mean those principles that bind humanity's origin to Heaven

via religion. It is a Single Truth, which is at the heart of all religions. It is important also not to confuse customary traditions with the primordial tradition, defined as the core of the forms of different traditions, for the heart of all the traditions is a single Universal Logos. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: SUNY, 1989), 67-69, 74.

4. Those changes, which started with the Reformation leading to the Enlightenment, and shaped European attitude toward religion as a backward form of human consciousness, are here referred to as "modernity." The triumph of reason over revelation, seventeenth-century scientism, evolution, intellectual relativism, secularism, and devaluation of religion are some of those traits that characterize the modern times.
5. Victor Segesvary, *From Illusion to Delusion: Globalization and the Contradictions of Late Modernity* (Bethesda, MD: International Scholars Publication, 1998), 6.
6. Ibid., 6.
7. Ibid., 7.
8. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 1974), 71-72.
9. Segesvary, 40.
10. Edmund Burke III, "Preface" in Marshall Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History* (Cambridge: 1993), xix.
11. Segesvary, 40.
12. Ibid., 41.
13. Rene Guenon, *Crisis of the Modern World*, Tr. By Marco Pallis & Richard Nicholson (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1999), 15.
14. Ibid., 15-16.
15. Segesvary, 61.
16. Ibid., 192.
17. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Modern Culture from a Comparative Perspective* (New York: SUNY, 1997), 92.
18. Ibid., 93.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 95.
21. Ibid., 93.
22. Gai Eton, *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1997), 12.
23. Enes Karic, *Essays on Behalf of Bosnia* (Bosnia-Herzegovina: El-Kalem, 1999), 259.