

The crucial role of social actors

Wednesday 27 July 2005, by [HOUTART François](#) (Date first published: September 2004).

The confusion and fear bred by growing intolerance and violence in the world makes the dialogue of civilizations, more than ever, necessary and urgent. This is the only way for humanity to avoid a major confrontation, the consequences of which would be hard to imagine. But this pressing invitation to encounter other cultures, civilizations or religions should not become an incantatory formula. Through constant repetition, this leitmotif could, in the end, lose its content and meaning.

To grasp the stakes involved, it is vital to probe into the meaning of these words and, for a start, define the implications of the term “civilization”. This is what François Houtart, professor emeritus of the University of Louvain, in Belgium, proposes. This paper was delivered during the fifth Asia-Europe People’s Forum (AEPF5) in Hanoi (Vietnam), in September, 2004, which assembled some 600 participants representing 350 organizations.

The author emphasizes that it is essential not to disconnect the dialogue of civilizations from economic, political and historical conditions, within which civilizations were constituted and express themselves today. This means not making of dialogue an “en-soi”, something in itself, without rapport with the context within which the cultural activity is practised. Educational development policies, for instance, “expose people to other conditions of living their culture and interacting with neighbors”.

But, the perspective proposed by the author does not stop here. This dialogue, he stresses, cannot be realized without radically contesting capitalist globalization which imposes “a culture dominated by market values” and builds “disparities between civilizations”. We have to give importance to action from the alter-globalization movement in its claim for interculturality based on egalitarian exchange and implying economic and political conditions other than those prevailing today.

And yet, this grassroots dialogue, though essential, is however insufficient. François Houtart adds that it should be accompanied by commitment from political and religious leaders, intellectuals from different disciplines, philosophers, sociologists, historians... Everyone should aim to bring forward personal and collective enrichment which is the fruit of dialogue and inter-civilizational exchange. A perspective that engages us all.

François Bellec (ed.)

Contents

- [The question is not new](#)
- [What is civilization ?](#)
- [The role of religion in \(...\)](#)
- [Building relations between \(...\)](#)
- [The situation is grave](#)

The globalization of the capitalist market, the true meaning of the present concept, has built its base on the development of two technological innovations: computer science and communications. It is precisely for this reason that the pace of capital accumulation (Washington consensus) had to be revived, and this was also the start of the knowledge economy.

Theoretically, this should favour cultural exchange, and therefore, the possibilities of dialogue between civilizations and religions. But, it hardly seems the case, to the point that Huntington does not hesitate to offer his view explaining present conflicts in terms of wars of civilizations, which, he moreover identifies with the major religious traditions.

The question is not new

We therefore need to ponder over the conditions that can bring about either dialogue or conflict. The question is not new. Without having to go far back in history, we can recall the interior court of the Accra palace in India, flanked on its four corners by stone pulpits dominating the space. They were meant for dialogue between the four religions of 16th century India: Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity. The kingdom did not build the legitimacy of its power on one particular religion and could thus organize the dialogue.

But, a little earlier, in the Muslim regions of India, the Portuguese led the war to establish trading posts. A Franciscan monk served as chronicler; he described the battles as fought in the name of God, against the unfaithful, in order to implant Christianity. He called on St. Francis of Assisi to intervene, which encouraged the combatants. At the same time, a Muslim historian related the same battles, fought in the name of Allah, against the unfaithful, to defend and protect Islam.

Today, the imperial speech of George W. Bush, during the Republican convention, starts from the idea of a mission, which he has to fulfil in the name of the American people, with God on his side, to combat evil and dismantle the rogue states. (A writing on the wall in Malaysia says: "Who is this God who blesses America? He is not mine!"). Otherwise, the fundamentalist Muslim discourse is built on defending Islam against destruction by the West and fighting in God's name.

As we can see, the issue of civilizations and religions is important in international relations and it continues to be taken up with contemporary globalization. And yet, to understand it, we need to develop a theoretical approach which allows us to avoid taking short-cut positions, like Huntington's, or reducing the issue to a simple case of a communication tool supposed to facilitate contact.

What is civilization ?

A very common problem is that of culturalism which sees culture as something in itself, detached from its social, political and economic context, hence, able to build bridges or provoke conflicts as an independent actor. This is Huntington's principal thesis, even if he does not ignore the other dimensions.

This brings up the question : What then is culture or civilization ? It is the whole representation of natural and social reality and all its expressions (languages, values, ethics, laws, institutions, art,

religions). Human beings are indeed able to perceive in thoughts and ideas, through their minds, their place in the universe, their social relations, their history. They are capable of evaluating situations and anticipating the future.

They construct in this way a second level of reality, which allows them to read and interpret the first and therefore induce action on the latter. It therefore concerns a central dimension in the construction and reproduction of their rapport with nature and social relations. This is what Maurice Godelier calls "the ideal part of reality". The institutionalization of culture creates roles, forms of organization, vested interests, norms of behaviour; in short, it builds the visibility and social weight of culture, calling for a certain type of relationship with other fields in society, in particular, the economic and the political.

It is in this manner that conflicts between cultural or religious systems in competition in society can begin, but also according to their instrumentalization by economic or political systems as ideologies (explanation and legitimation of economic and political relations), most often in situations of conflict. It is doubtless important not to neglect what we call "clashes of civilizations", but they happen when cultures and religions are linked (willingly or unwillingly) with economic or political interests.

Hence, the dialogue of civilizations cannot be conceived outside a general framework that includes economic and political relationships, and a historical perspective. How can we explain, for instance in Vietnam, the passage in the knowledge of foreign languages (and indirectly, cultures), from French to English?

Does adopting such an approach to reflect on the dialogue of civilizations signify that cultural actors are simply determined, in their capacity to act, by their context? Of course not. But they are conditioned; that is, the scale of possibilities is marked by the circumstances within which the cultural activity is practiced. A literate society offers new possibilities. Massive public investments in education expose people to new ways of living their culture and interacting with neighbours (today the world). Culture is the capacity with which social actors read, interpret reality, develop ethical judgements, anticipate the future (and thus make plans), but always in a given context.

True enough, the possibility of keeping distance in one's mind, with regard to the context, allows certain actors to go beyond or even contradict this latter. In Vietnam, even during colonial times, certain persons and institutions were capable of surmounting colonial relations to establish a cultural dialogue; it was never easy and often remained unilateral. In Latin America, the Spanish conquest rendered cultural dialogue impossible (despite the discourse of the 500th anniversary on the encounter of civilizations). The culture and religion of autochthonous peoples went underground, at most revealed by cultural anthropology. Today, the struggle of indigenous peoples to obtain economic rights and political recognition create new conditions for the affirmation of their cultural identity.

The role of religion in the discourse of imperialism

Religion is this part of culture which refers to the supernatural (this latter defined by the actors themselves). Its function also varies according to the type of society. Therefore, where the basis of life is totally dependent on nature and its rhythms (which are not the fruits of human activities), religion plays a central role in interpreting rapport with nature and social relations.

In pre-capitalist class societies, whenever a social group takes over natural resources (land, water) in an exclusive manner, without an equivalent service rendered, religion is used as legitimation factor : the will of the gods or of God is an element which is at the same time non-verifiable and

definite. This was known in caste, feudal or absolute power societies.

When conflict situations arise, religion often serves as basis for defining collective or national identity. Right now, conflicts are expressed in religious terms. Let us recall the Crusades, the Reconquista, the wars of religion in Europe; in the U.S, history has been built on a religious mission: the divine mandate to make creation bear fruit. Today, despite the development of capitalism which no longer needs religious arguments to develop its logic (the accumulation of capital is the fruit of labour), religion continues to play a powerful role as the discourse of imperialism. It is no longer a unanimous move, as in pre-capitalist societies, but it remains a useful language.

We say that we are living in secular societies. Although this is a relative concept (as seen in the discussion on the European Constitution), it is nonetheless relevant. The separation of church and state and laïcité are cultural traits of contemporary societies. It is the fruit of a long history in which various factors played a part. With the development of pre-capitalist market societies, elements of a new rationality were introduced and Max Weber showed how a new ethics detached itself from religious imperatives.

This was the case of Buddhism, of Jainism in India or Calvinism in Europe. Secularization was also influenced by the development of science and technology, since the Renaissance. Finally, it was also the result of a new perception of the state which integrated cultural (and therefore religious) pluralism. In short, it concerns societies where religion is no longer necessary as an ideology (explanation and legitimation of social relations), even if it can be useful in certain circumstances.

The secularization process has also produced extreme forms or exclusive rationalities, as a reaction against the cultural domination of religions. In the socialist countries the concept of scientific atheism developed, to the extent of constituting sections in the Science Academies. That meant making of atheism a new state religion, in full contradiction with the position of Marx, who fought radical atheism, which aimed at conditioning the social revolution into adopting this position. The French revolution, particularly radical in its anti-religious struggle, developed an anti-clerical Jacobinism which often led to republican fundamentalism. We can see its legacy in the law concerning the Islamic veil, which tends to transform cultural behaviour through legislation.

Building relations between social actors

The preceding reflections were aimed at proposing a reference framework to avoid positions which are too simplistic when looking at the question of dialogue of civilizations, and therefore of religions. To this effect, we must first of all remember that dialogue cannot be built between abstract entities or between concepts. It is a question of relations constructed between social actors, through culture, relations that are constructed collectively.

Consequently, our first approach to the question must be to consider the general context within which the actors move. It is in this way that we can see that capitalist globalization is one of the greatest obstacles to dialogue. Economic control and exploitation, political and military hegemony, the imposition of a culture which is dominated by market values, build disparities between civilizations. Access to technological instruments which could facilitate intercultural contact is unequally shared and so with the educational levels that allow to master them.

That is why present demands, including cultural demands, come within the alter-globalization movement. It demands for interculturality based on equal exchange. This also implies economic and political conditions which today are not yet realized. The de-legitimation of the capitalist logic, and

its political and military extensions, is therefore a cultural condition for the creation of dialogue.

To this, we must add a second condition : the rejection of all religious legitimization of political oppression and of violence. This does not at all exclude social struggles which can have, as deep motivation, a religious reference and ethics; but, it excludes the religious discourse of imperialism. The same is true about justifying terrorism which, by internal contradiction, ends up serving the enemy's interests (11 September 2001, for example).

Finally, the possibilities of dialogue are conditioned by the levels with which this latter is tied up. First of all, there is the dialogue at the grassroots level: the common struggle for justice, where believers of different religions and non-believers meet and where dialogue is constructed in an existential way. This can happen on the local, national and world levels. In fact, the experience of the World or continental Forums, to that effect, is particularly enriching. The institutional level is also important. Often, we tend to give it the priority, for it is clearly the most visible, but, without the first level, it remains very formal. Relations between leaders and religious authorities improve the general atmosphere and can ease certain historically built-up obstacles which have no real function in the present situation.

Dialogue also has its intellectual dimension. The work of historians, philosophers, experts in the social sciences and theologians are essential contributions which must accompany the two other levels. It is the role of intellectuals who, to be credible, must feel committed to the process and, to be useful, should remain critical.

The dialogue between civilizations and between religions is therefore possible. The globalization which can promote it will be that which can construct real bridges, the bases of exchange starting from equality and mutual respect.

The situation is grave

We must not try to hide it : the situation is grave. The obstacles to dialogue are many. The very first ones are found between the Western world (in majority Christian) and the Arab-Muslim world. Even if the economic and political reasons occupy the front stage, it is difficult for many peoples to distinguish between issues. The two major events are the war in Iraq and the politics of the Israeli government.

Only critical action by Christians and Jews against these policies will destroy the mix-up between "Western civilization" and Christianity or between Zionism and Jewishness. The analysis of the causes and mechanisms of these conflicts will show that they are only an acute phase in world domination and that the attitude of the U.S. was not different in Vietnam, nor today in Colombia. Dissociating the Christian faith from world-wide political hegemony is a pre-condition of dialogue.

But, this goes even further ; the West is also the heart of the capitalist system and constitutes its centre. The rest of the world, mostly non-Christian, is at the periphery. How can we talk about dialogue without questioning this imbalance? The notion of conflicts of civilizations is a smoke-screen which deviates attention from fundamental questions. And yet, culture, civilization, religion are not abstractions. The subjects that embody them are social actors who are able to transform situations.

Inspired by their values, their ethics or religious faith, they can de-legitimise the economic and political systems and be witnesses of real dialogue wherever they live. The smallest step taken together: inter-religious or inter-monastic dialogue or even common initiatives in favour of peace

and against war, carries with it meaning.

The present discussion on the future of Europe is not unrelated to this issue. Indeed, we consider Europe as the bearer of prime values in matters of civilization, parameters of democracy and of humanism. It is actually not thinking much of other people's opinion: those who lived through the Crusades and the conquests, the colonial wars, the repressions of peoples' desire for liberty and independence. It is ignoring the cry of those who call on the Europe of transnationals, of agricultural policies, of fiscal havens, the Europe-fortress. It is also forgetting the birth of capitalism, that of the working class, in short, the history of the dark side of the Enlightenment. The dark side in which victims from the South now react when we talk about civilizations and values.

The dialogue of civilizations, yes, but not without conditions. No doubt, the struggle for justice and for interculturality is not exempted from ambiguities. The idea is not to wait for humanity to be peopled by angels but to actually choose one's ambiguities, those of the powerful or those of the oppressed. The biblical tradition, the gospel in particular, does not leave us any choice in the matter.

If we have put the accent on a specific situation, that of Western politics, it is because it conditions the future of humanity. This does not allow us to ignore other realities, such as fundamentalism on a background of Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism. Wherever a culture or a religion becomes an instrument of domination, intransigence develops and destroys dialogue. On the other hand, wherever there is expressed sharing of faith and ethical references, respecting diversity, a world of brotherhood is built.

François Houtart

1-This « People's Forum », preceded the ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting), the summit of heads of states from 38 European and Asian countries. Its theme was "People's Action for Security in Asia and in Europe". The Centre Lebret co-organized the workshop on "Dialogue of Civilizations, Religions and Cultures".

2-Economic doctrine which came up at the end of the 1980s, after the breakdown of the Soviet bloc, under U.S. pressure. It recommended, among other things, the liberalization of commercial exchange, the privatization of public enterprises, market deregulation.

3- The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order, Samuel Huntington, Touchstone Books, NY, 1997.

4-Spanish term designating the re-conquest led in Spain by the Christians against the Muslims, in the Middle Ages.

5-German economist and sociologist (1864-1920).

P.S.

Published in "Faith and Develoment", Sept-Oct. 2004.

*François Houtart is director of Centre tricontinental (CETRI) of Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium) and of the journal Alternatives Sud. He has written several books and articles on globalization, religions and cultures.