

Hegemony, major obstacle to the dialogue between civilisations

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Which logic is behind the effort to unify the world under the umbrella of the economy and the market? And, facing the “twin challenge of hegemony and terror”, which route do we follow, in order to contemplate the future with a minimum of lucidity? The answer is not easy! For Chandra Muzaffar, flaunting the spectre of the clash of civilizations would result only in diverting attention from our tasks and in evading our responsibilities. Further, in the “cultural convergence of consumers”, as certain economists put it, our societies tend towards the uniform and homogeneous globalization of its products, its images and its world view.

Under the predominance of the United States, which incites the least developed countries to import American techniques, methods and organizational practices, we are entering a dangerous era of world hegemony, whose parallel, in the form of violent resistance, is no other than the hydra of terrorism. But this does not only concern the United States.

Chandra Muzaffar underlines the complex role of Islam and the generally ambiguous attitude of the West. Many Westerners express the conviction that Islam is a religion stained by the innate vice of violence. Since September 11, 2001, for a majority of our contemporaries in Europe and the Americas, the so-called incapacity of the Koranic religion to adapt to the complexities of globalization has become a quasi-certainty.

Most people forget to what extent Western civilization has remodeled, even risked destabilizing, the political, economic and cultural structures of Muslim societies, Are we not now living what the economist Serge Latouche calls the rule of “the westernization of the world”? This reign, in which the Muslim and Chinese money markets participate, is preparing a chaotic future. What is at stake is a certain vision of humanity.

Knowing, as Albert Camus wrote, in the « Combat », several hours after the 1945 Armistice, that “*liberty is either for all men or for nobody*”, we have to recognize the fact that men “*will always stand up against any practice of servitude*” wherever it arises, wherever it comes from. Such is the general challenge taken up by Chandra Muzaffar. It concerns us, even in the practice of our faith and in our view of development. Between dialogue and the omnipresent terror, between openness and stifling hegemony, civilizations, if they are to survive, have no choice.

Albert Longchamp

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In the wake of 'September 11', the subsequent assault on Afghanistan, and Washington's occupation of Iraq, the idea of a 'clash of civilisations' — between the West and Islam — has been resurrected in some circles. A handful of politicians, Christian evangelists and media commentators in the West, for instance, view Muslims and their faith as 'inclined towards violence' and therefore bent on destroying their 'civilised way of life'. Within the Muslim world there are groups that are convinced that the West — specifically the United States — has made Islam and its people its principal target and will not rest until they are totally subjugated.

A false feud

Actual realities, however, reveal that both these views are wrong. It was not just people in the West who regarded the suicide aircraft attacks on the World Trade Centre (WTO) and Pentagon as a heinous act; Muslims everywhere condemned the slaughter of innocents. Similarly, it was not just Muslims who were angered by the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. Millions of people in the West protested. Indeed, their protests, especially in the case of Iraq, were far more massive than what transpired in Muslim countries.

This shows that on fundamental issues of justice, of right and wrong, confronting humankind today, there is no West-Islam dichotomy. This would also be true of other issues such as Palestine, or for that matter, globalisation, nuclear disarmament, the Kyoto Accord, the Rome Statute and the Anti-Landmines Treaty. On some of these issues it is becoming increasingly clear that ruling elites and the people stand on opposite sides of the divide. The Iraq crisis in particular exposed this new fault-line in a number of Muslim countries as well as a few Western societies.

It is important that people in the West and the Muslim world take cognisance of this and refuse to be drawn into a false, artificial inter-civilisational feud. The real threat to our well-being emanates from vested interests that are determined to perpetuate their global military, political, economic and cultural hegemony. Though the focal-point of this global hegemony is Washington, its power is sustained by a whole network of elites, including rulers in the Muslim world! Global hegemonic power, it is more evident now than ever before, transcends national boundaries and religious borders.

And the victims of global hegemonic power—contrary to what some Muslims believe - are not just Muslims or Islam. Any people or government that insists upon its independence and autonomy and seeks to achieve justice and progress without submitting to the will of the hegemon runs the risk of earning its wrath. Over the decades, certain courageous nations and leaders have had to pay a heavy price for their determination to preserve their freedom and integrity. There are various episodes in recent Latin American history that bear out this truth but there are also examples from Asia, Africa and Europe. In more recent times, as a reaction to expanding hegemonic power in the post cold war decades, a fringe within the Muslim world has chosen to confront global and related domestic

injustices through the vile and vicious weapon of violence and terror. There is no need to emphasise that it is an approach that the vast majority of Muslims reject.

A peaceful, non-violent political change

In the midst of this twin challenge of hegemony and terror, people in Western societies and Muslim countries who are genuinely committed to a just world should re-affirm their faith in peaceful, non-violent political change. This should become the shared goal of people in both civilisations, and indeed human beings everywhere. After all, recent events have shown- as we have observed — that ‘we, the peoples’ of the world are capable of transcending ethnic, religious, cultural and civilisational barriers in our quest for justice and peace.

When a struggle of such monumental significance to the future of the human race awaits us, how can we allow a false inter-civilisational clash to divert our energies? Does it even make sense to talk of the ‘West’ and ‘Islam’ as two separate, distinct entities? Doesn’t the West, as a civilisational construct, exist within the Muslim world? Political institutions, economic systems and cultural values associated with Western civilisation have become part and parcel of Muslim societies in the course of the last two centuries. Likewise, Muslims constitute an important minority in almost every country in Europe and North America today. There are at least 27 million of them in both the continents. Besides, Islamic civilisation had, in the past, played a major role in shaping the European renaissance. In fact, almost every facet of European life from aesthetics and architecture to medicine and finance was influenced to a greater or lesser degree by Islamic values and principles. The scientific method itself which was the very foundation of the renaissance and indeed of the modern world was Islam’s gift to humanity. It is true - as the distinguished Chinese philosopher, Tu Weiming has argued — there would have been no renaissance without Islam !

That Islam has been part of the West and the West has been part of the Muslim world, is not the only reason why we should cease to attach any credence to the ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis. In a situation where geographical borders are becoming less relevant and cultural boundaries are becoming less real, it does not serve any purpose to reinforce civilisational barriers which are non-existent in any case. To understand the evolving global scenario, it may be more useful to talk in terms of global power structures and global interests. Such an approach will shed more light upon the realities prevailing in both the West and the Muslim world and upon the relationship between the two civilisations. It is when we come face to face with these realities that we will realise that it is not the clash of civilisations which is the real issue but the struggle for a just world where all human beings can live in peace and dignity.

The roots of the conflict

Civilisations as such do not interact with one another. It is groups and individuals within one religious or civilisational community that interact with groups and individuals within another religious or civilisational community. Most of the time these interactions have been peaceful. Indeed, they often revolve around concerns which are not religious or civilisational in the way in which these terms are understood. In most multi-religious societies for instance it is the ordinary transactions of life which almost always engage the attention and the energies of individuals and groups from different religious backgrounds as they interact with one another in the private realm or in the public square.

Even when religions or civilisations appear to be in conflict, the conflicts seldom stem from matters

pertaining to religious doctrine or religious practice. In fact, what have been described as 'religious conflicts' are often rooted in political or economic causes. If anything, they seem to centre around power and perceptions of power. Hence, the main thesis of this presentation : to understand the relationship between one religion or civilisation and another, one has to understand their power relationship. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the encounter between Islam and the West : that one civilisational encounter which has had - and which will continue to have - the greatest impact upon the destiny of the human race.

Fringe elements

However, to grasp the stakes of this encounter, one has to talk about violence. A fringe within the global Muslim community has chosen to respond to US hegemony and Israeli oppression of the Palestinian people through violence and terror. In the reckoning of these fringe elements, killing civilians is legitimate as long as it serves their cause. Even if their strategy brings some immediate gains, what they do not realize is that it will not succeed in destroying the structures of power that sustain global hegemony. More specifically, by destroying the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York on 11th September 2001, Osama and the AL-Qaeda have not made a dent upon the global economic system. By damaging the Pentagon, they have not been able to curb the expansion of US global military power since 911. Similarly, the bombing of a night-club in Bali on 12th October 2002 has not stemmed the tide of so-called 'decadent Western cultural influences' from overwhelming Indonesia and other Asian countries.

Besides, the deliberate killing of civilians in pursuit of one's political goals is anathema to Islamic teachings. For in Islam even when one is resisting aggression and oppression one should not harm non-combatants, or children or women or the elderly or the infirm. Indeed, the religion demands that Muslim soldiers engaged in warfare protect even livestock and vegetation. This is why leading Muslim theologians had condemned not only 911 but also the Bali Bombing and other such episodes. In this regard, it is important to recollect that at the height of the struggle against colonialism, most Islamic oriented movements had refrained from murdering the innocent because of their fidelity to Islamic ethics. Even when they captured soldiers of the colonial army, they often treated them with decent respect. In this connection, we should remind ourselves of an episode in the film 'The Lion of the Desert' when the followers of Umar Mukhtar, the morally upright leader of the Libyan resistance against Italian colonial rule, seek his permission to apply to the Italian soldiers they had taken captive, the same torture techniques that the Italians had meted out to the Libyans. Umar rebukes his followers with these words, *"Why should you emulate your conquerors? They are not your teachers."*

It is not just the terror tactics of militant groups such as Al-Qaeda that make them so abhorrent. These groups subscribe to a Manichean worldview which divides the inhabitants of the planet into 'virtuous Muslims' who will triumph in their struggle against 'evil infidels' who should be eliminated. Their views on women, law, culture and pre-Islamic history are equally repugnant and retrogressive. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan for instance which hosted Al-Qaeda epitomized this sort of bigoted, extremist, atavistic approach to Islam - which was why it was shunned by the Muslim world. Only 3 out of the 57 member states of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) - namely, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) - recognized the Taliban regime when it was in power from 1996 to 2001.

Combating hegemonic power

But the tragedy is that in a hegemonic global system in which gross injustices have become so pronounced, terror groups like Al-Qaeda have a constituency - especially when peaceful, non-violent ways of combating hegemonic power have yet to capture the popular imagination. No Arab or Muslim government or leader has come up with a viable alternative to the viciousness of violence. What is worse, the vast majority of them are totally subservient to Washington's dictates. The UN too has been utterly helpless in the face of US hegemony. Even global civil society, for all its potential, could not stop the US and Britain from going to war against Iraq-a war which the late Edward Said described as "arguably the most unpopular and unjust war in history."

Nonetheless, it is within global civil society that there is greatest awareness of, and the strongest determination to act against, hegemonic power. There are scores of activists and intellectuals all over the world who realize that hegemony is inimical to inter-religious and inter-civilisational amity and accord. For hegemony breeds imperial hubris which in turn induces the hegemon to adopt a condescending, often supercilious, attitude towards those who are the victims of its dominance and control. Besides, there is always a tendency on the part of the hegemon to use its dominant power to coerce others to submit to its might. Though the victims of hegemonic power often surrender to the will and the wish of the hegemon, it creates resentment, anger and hatred among them. What this means is that if the hegemon has no respect for its victims since they are subservient to its will, neither do the victims have any regard for the hegemon whom they view as a bully and even as a tyrant. Needless to say, these negative attitudes on both sides do not conduce towards the building of bridges between religions and civilisations. There is no need to emphasise that it is only when the power relationship between religions and civilisations becomes more equal and therefore more just, that the encounters between them will also become less antagonistic and more amicable.

This is why the US should cease to be a hegemonic power in the Middle East and elsewhere. There is no reason why a nation which has size and strength on its side should be hegemonic. It is important to observe in this connection that past and present leaders of China have always understood and appreciated this point. A little more than a year before his death, the distinguished Chinese scholar-statesman, Chou En Lai, reiterated his opposition to hegemony in a memorable conversation with the Japanese intellectual, Dr. Daisaku Ikeda. He remarked, "China will never become a superpower, I believe ...But if some day in the future it should and if it seeks to dominate the world, I would hope that the people of the world would join hands with the people of China to topple that regime."

Transforming Religion is necessary

Of course, if hegemonic relationships cease to exist between religions and civilizations there is no guarantee that genuine peace and harmony will prevail - if by peace and harmony we mean a condition that goes beyond the lessening of inter-religious antagonisms or the mere reduction of global tensions. Religions in particular will have to undergo a profound transformation if they are to play a major role as a positive force for global peace. All religions-or more precisely their interpreters and adherents — without exception will have to become less exclusive and more inclusive, less sectarian and more universal, less ritual oriented and more values based in their approach and orientation.

The imperative need for a more inclusive, universal, values based approach to religion is underscored by the increasing influence of the exclusive, sectarian, ritual oriented interpretation of religion in the contemporary world. This is one of the most formidable challenges confronting almost

every religion. In Hinduism for instance the narrow Hindutva ideologues with their chauvinistic articulation of the religion are seeking to repudiate the inherent universalism of the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita. In Buddhism, a small segment of the clergy is now attempting to present the religion in dogmatic terms - thus betraying the all-embracing enlightenment of its founder. Within the Jewish community there are Rabbis who have adopted a bellicose stance towards the 'infidels' without any regard for some of the universal notions of justice contained in Judaism. Some Christian evangelists today are trapped in a distorted, perverted understanding of the religion which negates Jesus' central message of love and mercy for the whole of humanity. Likewise, among Muslims, as we have seen, there are bigoted elements who are trying to hijack a religion whose very name is linked to peace and which describes God as *'The Compassionate and The Merciful'* in every Chapter of the Quran.

It is only too apparent that there is a struggle of singular significance unfolding within each and every religion. It is a struggle that has serious implications for inter-religious encounters. For those who subscribe to an exclusive view of religion have very little interest in communicating with the religious 'other' let alone establishing empathy with her. Those who espouse an inclusive approach to religion, on the other hand, are willing to transcend religious boundaries and embrace the whole of humanity — especially in their quest for universal justice and dignity.

This shows that the encounters between religions and civilizations in the future will be determined to some extent at least by the struggles taking place within religions and civilisations today. There is no reason to doubt that this will also be true of the encounter between Islam and the West.

P.S.

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