

## **Challenges to peaceful and creative interface among civilizations**

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We must dwell, first, on the word ‘civilization’. *Civilization* as the material manifestation (‘artifacts’) of foundational idea-systems (‘mentifacts’) stands for any one of the sequential phases in human history when a given system of institutions spreads beyond the boundaries of the state(s) that originally gave birth to it and shapes and conditions the lives of diverse peoples. Witness for example the Greek, the Roman, the Indic, the Islamic and the contemporary Western-Christendom.

It is to be noted that civilizations [1] do not clash - being sequential, by definition, they cannot, clash. Even within the same civilisational framework, attested conflicts have taken place – the two World Wars, for example or Iran and Iraq. Reasons for violence therefore lie deeper than at the manifest civilization level. *The reasons, the drivers, lie embedded in culture*. Even the ancient conflicts, such as those between Greeks and Persians or the repeated conflicts between Babylon and Judea as recorded in the Old Testament are *clashes of culture*. The contemporary world is permeated by the Western-Christian civilization and within this overarching frame, conflicts have taken place and newer conflicts are taking shape. We have therefore to look into Cultures to examine the nature of conflicts and the possibilities of a dialogue or multi-logue between them.

Culture, we said, is the store of mental constructs (‘mentifacts’), a set of codes on which the institutions of a civilization are built. Every culture has a number of codes – of art, theology, drama, society, commerce and trade, polity, poetry, architecture and so on. Above all, each culture has a philosophy, a founding ontology that generates the different codes including the codes that govern the society – its internal and external relations, those that govern the members of the society and those that govern the external relations of the society to other societies.

## II

Among major cultures, existing and extinct or nearly extinct, we may include Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam. Besides there are, and have been, innumerable tribal cultures scattered around the world, including many that have either shrunk or have been pushed to the verge of extinction. Not all cultures are equally structured; the tribal cultures for example are closer to nature and ‘less structured’ in the sense that they have not felt the need to develop organized thinking about all aspects of life. Not that there are no structures; only that many of the structures are close to the natural rhythm of life and are not generated by a priori intellectual framework. These cultures, as is evident, are major belief systems as well, though ‘culture’ would be larger than ‘religion’ in some ways.

Distance between cultures is the reason for the clash among cultures. The major cultures listed above have, almost all of them, equally elaborate codes. However they are not a homogeneous group and fall into sets according to any number of parameters. Some of them are, from the point of view of knowledge dynamism, context-free or context-bound. Thus the ontological claims of some of these cultures are now anachronistic given the knowledge we have now – the theory of Creation on a given day in a given year [2] in Christian ontology, for example. This is an example of context-bound claims that are hard to defend and

constitute interpretation challenges. As against this there are context free claims that retain their authenticity, the cyclical Hindu theory for example [3]. There appears to be some correlation between the load of context-bound (non-universal) claims and the closure that a culture puts on free discussion and interpretation of its 'dogma'. Systems are accordingly tolerant or intolerant. Indian and Chinese systems tend to be 'less structured', relatively more context free, and therefore allowing greater variation in practices.

Another difference is the degree of institutionalization, the degree of formalization and of the freezing of formal organizations. Thus the systems that structure a system of God-Text-Messiah-Priestly Class, each with its own formal given-ness tend to grow inflexible, exclude criticism and proscribe free interpretation. Internally differential Hinduism, Zoroastrianism to a large extent, Buddhism with its 'Schools', Jainism with its sects and Confucianism are more or less non-institutionalised systems.

The more institutionalized a culture, less flexible it is.

Further some cultures are bibliolatrous [4] while others are idolatrous. Hinduism is a living idol-worshipping culture, Hindus being the last happy 'pagans', so to say. Buddhism and Jainism also adopted idol worship. Though they have a large repository of authoritative texts, there is no book worship and a whole tradition of discussion and interpretation exists. Confucianism, particularly after its overlap with Buddhism in China, is also an idol-worshipping culture. On the other hand, though Sikhism, of all Indian systems, comes closest to Book Worship through its institution of Ten Gurus, it frees itself of the constraint of The One Voice.

We may re-classify context-bound, institutionalized and bibliolatrous systems as Hebraic and others as Pagan. These systems or cultures have different internal and external histories subjugating others or getting subjugated, causing suffering to others or being the sufferer, rejecting reform or encouraging reform. In this sense the Hebraic and the Pagan are two broad oppositional systems.

### III

The dispute between Bibliolatry and Idolatry has been the most fertile source of bloodshed in human history. What is this dispute all about?

There is an ontological difference between the bibliolatrous Hebraic and the idolatrous 'Pagan' world – views about the nature and cognition of reality. In the Hebraic view, God is one and God is formless. So there is no room for making images. In the Pagan view on the other hand, images are not a corruption of the mind as in fact the entire universe is a series of images.

As this has been a traumatic difference in the history of clash of cultures, it merits attention. Cultures differ and have differed, about image-making, about embodying an idea, about giving a body to an idea of the real, about, in short, the desirability of making images, about cognising an idea as idea and cognising the idea as an idol. For the Semitic, monotheistic systems, the idea of the real must exist only at the formless, disembodied ideational level. To make an idol, an image, of the idea is to create an illusion, a fiction, and a falsehood that is deleterious for the morals of man [5]. In the Semitic world-view, to return to our theme, to make a copy of a part of the concrete world which is real, physically real, and which has been created as such by One

Almighty God is blasphemous and presumptuous [6]. This uncompromising monotheistic principle of abstraction alone is real - a theological and pragmatic response to the Jewish history of pendulum swings between divisive polytheism and a monotheism unifying in its effect - is in opposition to its archetypal adversary, the Hellenist/ Aryan principle of plurality of gods, of polytheism.

The Semitic principle denies validity to the psychic freedom to conceptualise and to render in a desired and a desirable form (*sakara*) with given attributes (*saguna*), what is necessarily recognised as essentially formless (*nirakara*) and attributeless (**nirguna**). While the Jews have remained uncompromising *nirgunavadis*, Christianity satisfied this psychic and cognitive need to 'see', to 'visualise' by imaging the Son of God - Christ on the cross, Christ in Nativity, Christ at Last Supper - and the angels. Islam turned the Koran *ayat* (hymn) into a visual art to satisfy the same psychic need.

However, it is to be remembered that the image-making Greeks surrounded the ancient Semitic no-images world and the two antagonistic principles existed cheek by jowl for centuries. This contiguity of the other model explains the historic Jewish deviations into Hellenisms. It also explains Plato's conception of the ideational essence as the ultimate real, the visible being only a shadow or an image. In the classical Greek thought, the whole world is series of images. Images are re-presentations. The shadow of a tree, in Socrates, is an image of the tree, the reflection in the mirror, an image of my face, the idol of a feeling, an idea or a fact.

In the other cosmic sense this vast, visible, multiple; diverse physical world is treated in certain schools of thoughts as a mere image of the Real. The whole world is either full of only images, or is itself an image. One way, this cognisable universe is a *successive series* of images, as in Plato's ontology [7] where in the visible world is a complex of images that are images of other images and so on till you reach the level of ideational essence and the universe is thus a structure of varying degrees of illusion (phantasm) [8]. He argues four-fold ontology - levels of the real, of existence, of image, of Illusion (phantom). Isn't Socrates arguing, I often wonder, the Greek view and ascribing certain incompleteness to the Semitic world-view? And yet, the reality of the image is just that much suspect in Socrates suggesting an influence of the Semitic thought. In a language strangely close to that of Deuteronomy, Socrates says about the verbal images: "you will not betray me to the tragic poets and all other imitators - that kind of art seems to be a *corruption of the mind...*" [9].

Another set of related terms from Indian thought articulates the concept of *murti* as 'an investment of what is without form (*amurta*) with the visibility / comprehensibility / sensibility of a form'. A representation thus by making manifest what is unmanifest and making sensible what is beyond perception makes possible our cognition of the totality of an object. This totality as constituted in the work of art is the totality as experienced by the poet or the painter or the potter. In this sense, it is an *abhivyakti* an effort to manifest something, to bring something into being. As such, literary or art statement is an individual's statement and contingent for its truth on the individual consciousness.

On the one hand, thus, we have a world-view in which only the abstract, the ideational is real and its image, therefore, is necessarily a falsehood, a phantom and therefore misleading. On the other hand, we have continuity from the abstract to the concrete, from the conceptual to the actual.

The opposition between monotheism and pluri-theism has been the other rich source of cultural clash and conflict. There is this philosophic monism and theological monotheism. It is in opposition to pluralism and pluri-theism. The imperative of one God is the imperative of *my* God as against *yours* and of my one God against your gods. My God is *true* and your God is *false*; my God is *light*, your gods are *darkness*.

The theological monism, the presence of one God, is at the root of the conflict model of human progress so clearly visible in the western culture.

It is significant that in the Western tradition, 'knowledge' has been opposed to innocence, is associated with 'power' and leads to the Fall of man. The Renaissance marked the ontological shift from God to Man/Nature and the epistemological shift from verbal authority and experience to reason and experiment. What is, however, common throughout the Western history of ideas is the man-centered world-view. In the middle ages, God is the object of study for the sake of man, for his Redemption. Renaissance onwards, focus shifts to Nature as the object of study for the sake of man. It is interesting that a marked adversarial axis has always obtained between the western man and his object of study. It is almost as if man is always threatened by, or is at the least in the presence of, an adversary who has to be subdued or neutralised or used in the interest of man.

Internally, within the Western society, God entered into this adversarial relationship with man – seeking obedience from him, punishing him [10] in the Middle Ages. Now Nature becomes the great adversary and the new knowledge, Science, is put to service to bend nature to man's purpose. In the nineteenth century, it is man or a class of men against man or a class of men in the class-war of the Marxist doctrine, and now in the twentieth century it is woman against man. The Hebraic man-centered view that subordinates everything to man's comfort is the obvious foundation for this conflict model that informs practically all the western disciplinary codes - sociological, economic, and political and is at the heart of the Darwinian evolutionary thought as well.

Externally, the other has been the adversary. He is enveloped in darkness and it is the mission of the believers to evangelise by proselytising. Knowledge is an instrument of power in this conflict model, an instrument to handle the 'adversary'. In the Old Testament, we have already noted, man is given "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth..." [11] The Western man has been granted this dominion and has treated it as a matter of his right to maintain and extend this dominion. The rise of sciences and the new power of technology are now put to this end. And as the Western history shows, this 'organised' knowledge has often proved destructive. Its power rests on the authority of 'truth' it attains through societal and institutional support. At a given time in the Western history, there has always been a dominant 'truth' of the time. This is the consequence of the Hebraic monistic imperative. There is in the western mind, a monistic imperative – a 'truth' at a time. Between the dichotomies, only one is true and has to be cognised and then adhered to. This imperative is driven by the uncompromising monism of the Hebraic worldview. [12] Only one step from this is the drive to convert, failing which, to destroy the other.

Thus the monistic, monotheistic, bibliolatrous, institutionalized cultures form one set. The pluralistic, pluri-theistic, idolatrous, non-institutionalized cultures form the other set. The first set, considering their history, may be designated as 'predators'; the second set similarly may be designated as 'fodder'. The only exception, the Jews, have moved out of their native

*predator group* by virtue of not sharing the twin cultural imperatives of iconoclasm and evangelism. In fact by virtue of their historical experience, they are distinguished members of the *fodder* set.

Let us have a brief look at the attested experience of some of these cultures. Remember that violence and conflict have taken place both between the fodder and the predator cultures and between the predator cultures themselves. The cause and character are different – in the first case it is sanctified explicitly as a religious mission; in the second case, it is a fight for the distribution or possession of territory. The degree of vandalism differs in the two cases.

The Jewish experience is too well known: their Diaspora, wanderings through time, the inquisition in Southern Europe, spread through Europe and Russia, the holocaust, and the struggle for survival in their homeland. It has been one long story of persecution and violence directed at their very being.

The *Books of Jeremiah* are living records of their suffering, the paradigm of their recurrent experience. Lamentations of Jeremiah may be quoted as a representation of their typical experience. Mournful Jeremiah sings the miseries of Zedekiah, the King of Jerusalem: “Then the King of Babylon slew the sons of Zedekiah in Riblah before his eyes: also the King of Babylon slew all the nobles of Judah. “Moreover he put out Zedekiah’s eyes, and bound him with chains, to carry him to Babylon.” [13]

This is a universal narrative. He then sings the miseries of the people: “The Lord ...hath swallowed up all her palaces: he hath destroyed his strong holds, and hath increased in the daughter of Judah mourning and lamentation. “The elders...sit upon the ground, *and* keep silence: they have cast up dust upon their heads; they have girded themselves with sackcloth; the virgins of Jerusalem hang down their heads to the ground. “Mine eyes do fail with tears...because the children and the sucklings swoon in the streets. “They say to their mothers, Where *is* corn and where *is* wine? “The young and the old lie on the ground in the streets; my virgins and my young men are fallen by the sword. “Fear and snare is upon us, desolation and destruction. “Our inheritance is turned strangers, our houses to aliens. “Princes are hanged up by their hands: “The elders have ceased from the gate, the young men from their music. “They ravished the women in Zion, and the maids in the cities of Judah. “The joy of our heart is ceased; our dance is turned into mourning.” [14]

This is a universal narrative of subjugation, dispossession and destruction. One need not give name to it. The Jews suffered persecution and they were forced out of their homeland or moved out for a life free of persecution. The Zoroastrian experience replicated the Jewish Diaspora – they now live, the last few of them, in India, after they fled their homeland in the 7th century and are on the verge of extinction. The Bahais moved over and are in India. And Tibetans fled their homeland and came to India in 1961. The Jews apparently have a homeland; but they are completely vulnerable today – they have been gathered together from their wide grazing lands and herded into a *pen* that is the state of Israel.

The Hindu experience also falls into the Old Testament paradigm. But it is a little different. They did not move out and they are under a dual siege in their own homeland. The saving grace is they are too numerous and have a long cultural memory and hopefully, they will survive. But they too have paid unbelievable price as ‘fodder’. As Will Durant notes: “The Muslim conquest of India is the bloodiest chapter in human history.” [15]

S. Sant Singh Sekhon quotes Jadu Nath Sarkar:

“The highest duty of a Muslim ruler was to carry on *Jihad* by waging war against infidel lands till they became a part of the realm of Islam and their populations were converted into true believers.” [16]

Sekhon ji also quotes Al Beruni’s *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*:

“[Balban proclaimed] he who would bring the head of a rebel [read, Hindu] would get a silver *tanka*, whereas the captor of a living prisoner would get two pieces...some daring Afghans brought the heads of as many as hundred Hindus each. The blood shedding swords of the Turks made four Hindus of every two; many hundreds of Hindus were flayed with knives and their stuffed skins were ordered to be hung on city gates.” [17]

Sacking of cities, demolition of temples, burning down of the universities, slaughter of citizenry – all are attested. As is said:

“Say to the infidels that if they give up the path of their irreligious beliefs, they will be forgiven, but if they persist in following the path of an infidel, fight then against them till strife be at an end and the religion be all of it of God’s.” [18]

“After such knowledge, what forgiveness?” [19]

“I sing / Of ancient wrongs and battles long ago’ as Virgil sings.

Memory is defined as experience that refuses to die away [20]. Suffering sediments into the unconscious of a people.

There is a need to look squarely into this. Can there be a dialogue? There is a fundamental divide - the fodder cultures are non-proselytising, while it is the mission of the predator cultures to proselytise. That principle has sanctified violence, loot and exercise of power. Since 2001 [21], there have been conferences and seminars around the globe, but as the Tokyo / Kyoto conference noted “even for those who have been much involved in issues of dialogue, discussions are not always easy, in particular when they touch upon specific values and norms” [22].

Then, not all cultures employ dialogue as a valid or primary epistemology. Indian culture has always been dialogic and to some extent the ancient Greeks and the Romans resorted to disputation to reach the truth. Not all cultures are *dialogic*. Their syntax is declarative and their mood is imperative.

Then is the dialogue not possible? It looks as if it is not and that a semblance of the dialogue usually takes place when the power equation changes in favour of the fodder culture or just swings away from one of the predator cultures, as we have witnessed in recent days.

Alternatively we have to create conditions for a dialogue, such as:

- eschewing the euphemisms, shibboleths and expression of pious sentiment

- work for a change of heart among the aggressive cultures so that there is a readiness to co-exist. This change must come from within the concerned cultures.
- acknowledgement of wrongs perpetrated and some reparation for those wrongs as when the Pope recently apologized for the holocaust.
- philosophic/ideological reform and shift that fundamentally alters the relationship between the predator and fodder culture, such as giving up the proselytizing mission and dreams such as pan-Islamisation. This must come from within the communities. Finally,
- adoption of *dialogue* as a method in place of *violence*.

A near impossible agenda in the current world.

But not really. The ancient, living Hindu culture of India has evolved more than one model of non-violent co-existence – Vedic, Buddhist, Jain and Sikh. No culture has come even near the Jain worldview totally committed to non-violence against all forms of life. The Hindu worldview has, since the *Rgveda* looked upon all humanity as a family, Secondly, the Hindu worldview accepts unconditionally that different conceptual structures can be set up to explain the same given reality. Thirdly, the Hindu worldview allows unconditionally plurality of beliefs, *svavikalpajah...pravada. bahudha mata* [23]. Fourthly, the Hindu worldview from the very beginning has believed in sharing, advocating as it does disciplined consumption, *tyaktena bhunjitha* [24]. Fifth, the Hindu worldview upholds sanctity of all life, *jiva*, not only human. Sixth, the Hindu worldview upholds respect for Nature and therefore opposes *dohana*, exploitation [25]. Finally, the Hindu worldview advocates as super-ordinate twin values of *sanyam*, restraint, and of *niyama*, self-discipline, guided by the over-arching principle of righteousness, *dharma*.

Here is the solution to the greedy, war-torn, hate filled world. Adoption of these principles. **But to talk of this is to invite ridicule, from some of one's own countrymen, particularly the educated variety.** This vocabulary has been marginalized in the hard sell, commercial world, and rubbished by a section of the intellectual class among its own speakers. But *saswata*, perennial, ideas and words do not die – they hibernate and wait for the season to change. There are voices even in the other world beginning to speak this language.

Personally, I believe with Heraclitus that humanity learns its good lessons only the hard way.

### Notes

- 1) Regardless of the title of that famous Huntington book.
- 2) October 24, 4004 B.C.
- 3) *The Bhagavad-Gita*
- 4) Worship of a Book as God's word, unquestioned and unquestionable, a locus of ritual practices.
- 5) This point of view has off and on been an equally important principle of such reformist systems of thought in India as early Buddhism and early Sikhism.
- 6) Make no images, said Moses: "You saw no form of any kind the day the Lord spoke to you ...Therefore watch yourself very carefully, so that you do not make for yourself an idol, an image of any shape..." (Deuteronomy 4.33). Giving a **form**, a significant shape, to an abstraction, such as God, is a corruption of the original, and, besides, in Semitic theology – "...if you then become corrupt and make any kind of idol, doing evil in the eyes of the Lord..." (Deuteronomy 4.33.25).
- 7) *Republic*, Book VI

- 8) The other way, in *Vedanta*, this whole cognisable universe is a continuous chain of images, all of them together being merely diverse forms of the Ultimate Real.
- 9) *Republic X*
- 10) *Old Testament, Deuteronomy*, 4.10, 43
- 11) *Genesis* 1.26
- 12) There is the argument now, the Post-Modernist argument that there is no one 'truth', or truth at all. This is ultimately an argument for plurality and /or nihilism.
- 13) *Jeremiah*, LI.10, 11
- 14) *The Lamentations of Jeremiah* II.2, 10, 11, 12, 21; III.47; V.2, 11, 12, 14
- 15) Will Durant, *History of civilization*, Chapter 10
- 16) In Sant Singh Sekhon. 'Islam in India – The Tragic Dimension' in Attar Singh, ed. *Socio-Cultural Impact of Islam on India*. Panjab University, Chandigarh. 1976, pp.41-51
- 17) *ibid...*p.47
- 18) The Quran, VIII
- 19) T.S.Eliot, *The Four Quartets*
- 20) Patanjali's *Yoga sutra*, I.11
- 21) The UNESCO Proclamation of 2001 as the "UN year of Dialogue among Civilisations".
- 22) See, <http://www.unu.edu/dialogue>
- 23) Bhartrhari, *Vakyapadiya*, I.8
- 24) *Isavasyopanisad*, verse.1
- 25) Prithu, a fabled King is remembered in the Puranas as one who over-exploited the resources of the earth.

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<http://www.vijayvaani.com/FrmPublicDisplayArticle.aspx?id=1791>