

## The Need for Civilizational Dialogue

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**Abstract:** *The mutual miscomprehension between the civilizations of Asia and the West can lead to a dangerous form of confrontation. Already the divisions have hardened. It is imperative that the civilizations initiate a process of dialogue between themselves, so that they may together contribute towards building a better world.*

In all the literary traditions of mankind, the love story is the most enduring, for love brings forth the best, and also the worst in man. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare rends our hearts with the story of love's entanglement with loyalty. Anguished by the acrimony and bitterness of the family feud, Juliet is prepared to forsake her family for love:

Deny thy father, and refuse thy name;  
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,  
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

In the encounter between the civilizations of the East and the West, generations of intelligentsia from the East—the Muslims, the Hindus, the Confucianists—have been caught in an equally tormenting predicament, a predicament of a different kind, yet more profound and far-reaching; whether to remain loyal to one's traditions or to depart for a way of life perceived as superior. They generally fall into two distinct categories. There were those who forswore everything from the West because of their passionate and tenacious hold on everything from their own traditions. And then there were those who, overwhelmed by the dazzling light of Western civilization, became renegades to condemn their own.

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\*Convocation address delivered by Rt. Hon. Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, and President International Islamic University Malaysia, at Georgetown University, Washington D.C., October 6, 1994.

The theme is still very much alive, although it has evolved into more complex alignments reflecting the political changes and intellectual milestones of the last century. Now, a new debate is brewing. But this time the exotic and moribund East has been transfigured into an energetic and menacing Asia, threatening the lifestyles and the very foundations of the industrial West.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the European writers on Southeast Asia conjured an image of 'the lazy native' to form an ideology to justify colonialism. Today, a new image is being distilled in the mass media and popular travel writings: Asia is an economic juggernaut and the continent is a vast sweatshop. Asian values are said to be responsible not only for the frugality, discipline, diligence, and vigour of the people, but also for the excesses and autocratic tendencies of the ruling elites. The fear of competition has been transposed into an impending clash on a civilizational scale.

On the other hand, Asian spokesmen, in their eagerness to fend off criticism, often indulge in stereotyping the West. The West is nothing more than a moral wasteland. Crime, depravity, and licentiousness are the order of the day. It is a lost society of aimless wandering souls.

It is against this background that we must engage ourselves in civilizational dialogue, for we fear that protracted mutual miscomprehension will lead to a supplanting of the Cold War with more insidious forms of confrontation. Indeed, this dialogue has become an imperative at a time when the world has shrunk into a global village. For it is a pre-condition for the establishment of a *convivencia*, a harmonious and enriching experience of living together among people of diverse religions and cultures.

### Should Civilizations Clash?

Some four decades ago the historian Arnold Toynbee published a small volume containing extracts of historical works, including a section from Josephus' *History of the Romano-Jewish War*. That section was titled by Toynbee as "The Conflict of Civilizations (A.D. 66)." Thus the idea of a clash of civilizations is not altogether new. The question, however, is not whether civilizations will necessarily clash, rather whether civilizations ought to clash. For us Muslims, the divine imperative as expressed in the Qur'ān is unambiguous. Humanity has been created to form tribes, races and nations, whose differences in physical characteristics, languages, and modes of thought are but the means for the purpose of *li-ta'arafa*—"getting to know one another." On the other

hand, in the narrative of modernity, the story of the encounter is less straight forward. It is the progressive globalization of a particular language of discourse issuing from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, that being the only true and possible discourse for man-kind. It is the light of reason against the darkness of magic and superstition, of dynamism against sterility, of civilization against barbarism.

True, the age of the civilizing mission is over and no one talks about it any longer without a touch of remorse or embarrassment. But at any rate the undertone is as resounding, and in our day it has metamorphosed into a *mission démocratrice*. That enterprise, implied or expressed, has acquired the status of a dogma in foreign relations. It is being espoused with great sophistication, ready to be enforced with the mightiest fire-power known in human history.

By the same token, the East is no less worthy of blame. The recent successes of the economies of Asia, and the growing self-confidence of the people, have on occasions given rise to overtones of arrogance and trumpets of triumphalism. In the process, they betray their most enduring value, that of humility before the vastness of human endeavour and the totality of creation.

We are already in fundamental agreement, in that we subscribe to the universal quest for truth and the pursuit of justice and virtue. We rejoice in beauty, both within ourselves and in what surrounds us. We long for knowledge, peace and security amid the mysteries and uncertainties of the universe. In our disjointed world, therefore, with so much ugliness, violence, and injustice, there cannot be a nobler aim and vocation than the realization of values which unify humanity, despite the great diversity of climes and cultures.

The poignancy in the question posed by T.S. Eliot, "Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" is even more profoundly felt today than when it was first raised. And no community has suffered more wrong from the information explosion than the Muslims. The gullible consumer of the mass media of today would form the impression that the Muslim world is only populated by stern and menacing fundamentalists. The fact of the matter is, the Muslim is not without a sense of humour, and his civilization has produced plenty of love stories. For example, from the Moroccan coast of the Atlantic to the tiny Indonesia island of Merauke in the Pacific, Muslim children are raised with the enchanting tale of love between Laylá and Majnūn. As the story goes, the young man was scorned and ridiculed for his obsession with the maiden because to the eyes of the world Laylá was hideous in physical

appearance. In response to this, the youth always replied: "To see the beauty of Laylá, one requires the eyes of Majnūn."

### **The Muslim Malaise**

Looking at our co-religionists, we tend to be Majnūn most of the time. But we are also deeply aware that the Muslim world is not without its excesses and internal contradictions. The negative image of Muslims to the rest of the world is to a great extent the result of the failure of many Muslims themselves to realize and manifest their own ideals. Ignorance, injustice, corruption, hypocrisy, and the erosion in moral rectitude are quite prevalent in contemporary Muslim societies.

The decision of this University to initiate studies and research programmes concerning Islam in Southeast Asia comes at a critical time when Islam itself needs a platform to project its positive aspects. The experience of contemporary Islam in Southeast Asia has much to contribute, not only to the Muslims in other regions, but possibly also to the world at large. This is due to the fact that the devout South Asian Muslim practices his religion in the context of a truly multicultural world. Especially in Malaysia, a Muslim is never unaware of the presence of people of other faiths, as friends, colleagues, collaborators, partners or even competitors.

The challenges before Muslims, like as before people of other traditions in Asia today, are indeed great. They must endeavour to alleviate ignorance, disease, and destitution. They have to battle corruption and arrest moral decay. They have to strengthen the institutions of civil society to ensure order and stability, as well as protect the individual from the unwarranted denial of his rights. Indeed, these are the imperatives of all the great religious traditions, and one could do no greater disservice than to invoke the name of tradition to justify excesses, injustices and authoritarianism in society. In this regard, the renewal of traditions must mean reliving their ideals—truth, justice, and compassion—and not resurrecting past aberrations, of the depraved and the decadent.

As Asia renews itself, it must have the confidence to appreciate and learn from what is truly great in Western civilization. Indeed, in the traditions of the West, there are other languages of discourse apart from the one presented since the Renaissance. If the dialogue between Asian and Western civilizations is to become productive, Asians must transcend the pain and bitterness following their earlier encounters. The Islamic world must surely look beyond the Crusades and the era of colonialism.

For its part, the West probably has to look at the East and the rest of the world in a new light, a perspective illuminated by a profound empathy for the predicament of the rest. The prospect for productive engagement and cultural enrichment must take the place of the fear of competition. In this enterprise no region should be totally forgotten for reasons of economic backwardness, for that would be tantamount to moral abdication.

The global *convivencia* that is to be the primary motif of civilizational dialogue is not altogether new. Centuries before us Dante envisaged the establishment of the 'universal community of human race,' a community dedicated to justice and the realization of man's intellectual potential. Several time in the past it was experienced as a living reality, and as the origin of the term denotes, Spain under Moorish rule represents one of its crowning fulfillments.

### **Conclusions**

It is an irony of our time that as the world becomes smaller, the consciousness of the divisions amongst the human community magnifies: the East and the West, the North and South, the powerful and the marginalized. Much of these divisions has come about and is perpetuated by the practice of polity that has become totally identified with the exercise of power, and by leadership that is increasingly divorced from ethical concerns and morality. Enduring peace and security of the world must be built not upon religious, cultural, economic, or political hegemonies, but on mutual awareness and concern. For understanding brings respect, and respect prepares the way for love; and love, like truth, liberates and takes us onto a higher kind of loyalty; onto what is true, just and virtuous.