

In Defence of Dialogue of Civilizations

Written by Fabio Petito

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FABIO PETITO, MAR 3 2010

What we have seen in a number of recent events that have characterized the relationship between the Islamic and the Western worlds is the risk of an intellectual/political construction of the cultural Other. To warn against the political construction of the Self through opposition to a negative-valued, dangerous or threatening Other is of great topicality in a time when the discourses of the clash of civilisations as well as the 'us versus them' and 'good/evil' oppositions have acquired a worryingly prominent place in the public spheres of many different countries. Probably the book that highlighted such a risk more than any other is Edward Said's *Orientalism*. As Said himself puts it, the main intellectual issue raised by *Orientalism* is: "Can one divide human reality into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions...and survive the consequences humanly?"[1] This is a question that poses also an important challenge to the camp that supports a dialogue of civilisations as the solution to the worrying possibility of the clash. It is a critique that cannot easily be dismissed as it is widely and sincerely held not only by liberals but also by a large spectrum of secular-minded and humanist scholars: this view is in fact deeply rooted in that constitutive intellectual-political experience of modernity, which Scott Thomas has effectively called the "Westphalian presumption", according to which the assertiveness of religious and cultural differences in the political realm is doomed to lead to instability, conflicts and political violence and therefore must be privatised if there is to be international order.[2]

From this perspective, in the context of politics the emphasis on civilizations and religions – even if within the framework of a dialogical mode – risks activating the politically dangerous mechanism of the Self/Other opposition. For this reason Said had a certain understandable uneasiness towards such broad cultural categories as the Orient and the West and persuasively argued for a critique of essentialised identities on the ground that civilizations are hybrid, historically constructed by encounters, exchanges, impure by definition, are always internally contested and are objects of a plurality of interpretation.[3] This is also why he opposed the romantic interpretation of cultures as internally coherent and organically sealed and even identified in the historicism of Vico and Herder, scholars to which he acknowledges an intellectual debt in other important ways, the roots of dangerous nationalist tendencies.[4] A similar concern has also recently been voiced by the Indian Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen who has accused what he has dubbed a 'civilization-based thinking' of being extremely dangerous and one which can be deleterious not only when used in the theory of the clash of civilisations but also in its well-meaning attempts of dialogue.[5]

This view, which assumes a link between 'strong' religious-cultural identities and political violence, is in my view implicit in Said's critique of the construction of the Self through the opposition to a negative-valued Other as well as rather explicit in Sen's recent volume bearing the self-explanatory title: *Identity and Violence*. More generally, this thesis has provided one of the predominant interpretative frameworks on the nature of post-Cold War political violence and instability, whether in the form of the new ethno-religious civil wars driven by the politics of identity, or the irrational politics and terrorism of religious fundamentalists aspiring to 'martyrdom' or even scenarios involving possible conflicts and confrontations on large cultural-religious scale as in the case of a coming clash of civilisations.[6]

From the perspective of Said and Sen, there is a sense that to prevent civilizational or religious inspired political violence, the only ways are either to stress the necessarily multiple nature of civilizational-religious identities or to call for their 'privatisation'. What this argument, which as I have already mentioned holds a powerful academic status

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both because of the 'Westphalian' experience and a certain implicit bias of social sciences against civilizational and religious traditions, overlooks is the theoretical and empirical point that is increasingly emerging from a number of recent strands of research according to which religiously-inspired political violence is often characterised by doctrinally 'weak' and superficial religious identities as these are the most conducive substratum to violent politicisation by political entrepreneurs.[7]

With reference to religiously-inspired political violence, arguably the paradigmatic and most difficult test for the above-mentioned thesis, the protestant theologian Miroslav Volf, a Croatian immigrant to the US, who was personally confronted with this phenomenon first through the use of Christianity in the harrowing civil war in ex-Yugoslavia and then through the fundamentalist politics of his own American coreligionists, has effectively argued that the political violence legitimized by religion is normally the result of the politicisation of a "vague religiosity" conceived of as exclusively a private affairs of individuals or reduced to "cultural resources endowed with a diffuse aura of sacred".[8] In other words and contrary to the predominant view, religiously-inspired political violence would be characterized by a doctrinally 'weak' religious identities, that is, identities that are up-rooted and banalised and have often not been sustained by a process of generational transmission of tradition. On the contrary, doctrinally 'strong' religious identities would rather be more common in religious actors involved in processes of conflict-resolution and peace-making.[9]

In addition, as some contemporary research in the field of sociology of religion suggests with specific reference to the rise of Christian fundamentalism (although the same could apply to other forms of religious extremism), there seems to be a correlation between the so-called individualisation and subjectivisation of belief, referred to as 'light religion', and the rise of an assertive communitarianism manifesting the conservative moral positions and political orientations of a politically 'strong religion'.[10] This would reinforce the view that when religious identities are vague and stripped of a thick reference to an ongoing tradition, politicization provides a mechanism to supplement a 'light' religious tradition and consolidate the community of the 'believers' around a small number of political 'hot issues', as the 'culture war' of the American domestic politics of the last decades seems to suggest, as well as the politicisation of religion in the nationalist construction of the Other in the Balkans of the 1990s has proved.[11]

Summing up, contrary to Said and Sen's normative rejection of 'civilization-based thinking' as politically dangerous and irresponsible, recent analyses seem to suggest the need, in a qualified sense, for 'more' religious and cultural traditions rather than less in order to oppose religiously-inspired political violence. As also Peter Berger has noted: "Contrary to currently fashionable assumptions, the difference between civilizations is not a threat in itself but rather a precondition to formulating identities that are characterised by a certain degree of stability".[12]

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[1] Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Penguin Books, 1978), 45.

[2] See Scott Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

[3] See also Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

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[4] For Vico and Herder see Said, *Orientalism*, 118.

[5] See Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

[6] See respectively Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York : Free Press, 1991) and Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*.

[7] For the mechanisms at work in the violent politicization of religion see Andreas Hasenclever and Volker Ritteberger, "Does Religion Make a Difference? Theoretical Approaches to the Impact of Faith on Political Conflict", in F. Petito and P. Hatzopoulos *Religion in International Relations: The return from exile* (Palgrave, 2003), 107-45.

[8] Miroslav Volf, "Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Justice: A Theological Contribution to a More Peaceful Social Environment", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29, no. 3 (2000): 862 and 866.

[9] See also R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

[10] Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Le pèlerin et le converti. La religion en mouvement* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999). The in-depth Chicago research project on religious fundamentalism with empirical studies on all the major religious traditions seems to confirm this idea. See Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *The Fundamentalism Project*, vols. 1-5 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991-1995).

[11] For the American 'culture war', see James Davidson Hunter, "The American Culture War", in *The Limits of Social Cohesion: Conflict and Mediation in Pluralist Societies*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 1-37. For the role of religion and nationalism in the end of Yugoslavia, see David Campbell, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity, and Justice in Bosnia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). Interestingly Campbell starts his analysis with the following quotation from a Bosnian woman, which reveals the 'light' nature of the religious-nationalist consciousness before the war started: "I am a Muslim", she told us, "but I didn't know that before the war. Before the war, of course, we were all atheists!", 1.

[12] Peter Berger, 'Conclusion', *The Limits of Social Cohesion*, (1998), 372

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