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## **Cultures in Conflict or Dialogue?**

### **Alternative Models**

#### **I. Introduction**

Cultures are living entities, carried by living human beings, and subject to the same laws of life, birth and death, struggle or concord, conflict or dialogue. The two alternative models exist. By-passing conflict and preaching dialogue is mere rhetoric. History of cultures would show when the two models existed and under which circumstances.

Every culture has two aspects: a particularist and a universalist. The particularist aspect is the vehicle of self-identity, self-affirmation and autonomy. The universalist aspect is the common share between the self and the other, "solvitur in escelsis," the common goal for all humanity. The relation between particularism and universalism is like that between change and permanence.

Since culture is the expression of a people, and a people struggles for survival, culture becomes a vehicle for power, a tool for survival. Cultures provide the worldview, the image of the self and of the other, the value system to adopt, the norms of behavior, the

legitimizing devices. They create their own history and revitalize, by their own will, choices from memory. Therefore, culture is power. There is no innocent culture, calling for love of the neighbour and the Kingdom of God, except in void and formal preaching, not in social science. Wishful thought is something and plane reality is something else.

Cultural interaction, likewise, is the expression of the balance of power between cultures. Dialogue is not only mutual talk, but dialectics between the two partners. The power of Greek Logos was behind the inter-cultural dialogue between Greek philosophy and nascent Islam. The power of the Transcendence was behind the intercultural relation between Islamic sciences and

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philosophy from one side, and medieval scholasticism on the other side. The power of convergence was behind the Andalusian symbiosis among Islamic, Jewish and Christian cultures in Spain. The power of domination was, and maybe is, behind the cultural interaction between Europe in modern times and Asia, Africa and Latin America since the "Geographic Discoveries" by the capital C of the small cs, from the center to the periphery. Examples from the two alternative models, conflict and dialogue, are numerous. The challenge is when does each model occur and under which circumstances? And if the model of conflict prevails nowadays, what are the ways and means to change it to the model of dialogue?

## **II. The Conflict Model**

The conflict model occurs when one culture makes itself the culture with capital C and all other cultures are cultures with small cs. The relation between the two is a metaphysical one, the relation between one and many, an ontological one, God and creatures, and even an ethical relation, the Ought to the Is. One culture, for quest to power, transcends other cultures and surpasses them, like Zeus on Mount Olympus. The order of cultures is a value order. One, the capital C, is superior to others, the small

c's, one in the center, others in the periphery.

Afterwards, the process of acculturation begins. In the mind of the capital C, acculturation means dropping and adding, dropping the Indigenous and adding the exogenous, a necessary passage from underdevelopment to development, from backwardness to progress, from primitivism to modernism, from death to life. In the mind of small cs, acculturation means the destruction of national cultures of small cs to implement the imperial culture of capital C. Since culture is the expression of national identity, the destruction of national cultures is a destruction of national entities, communities and nations.

That was the case of Western culture vis à vis non-Western cultures in Africa, Asia and Latin America. This was the supremacy of the white man's culture over the cultures of black, red and yellow peoples. Europe is in the center and the three continents on the periphery. The movement began when the so called "Geographic Discoveries" initiated Western colonialism to the ancient world and led to missionary invasions. The largest pillage in world history began during the European "modern times" with the flow of wealth, gold and slaves from the periphery to the center, the destruction of the periphery for the

construction of the center. The universal culture became the center where all particular cultures enter.

Since Western culture is a compound culture from several sub-cultures (British, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, Russian) every national sub-culture played the role of the European Mother Culture. Thus, the French destroyed Arab and Islamic culture in north, central and west Africa, especially in Algeria. The British did the same in India, the Dutch in Indonesia, the Portuguese and the Spanish in Latin America, the Italians in Ethiopia and Somalia, the Russians in Islamic republics of central Asia. In the name of the West, all of them destroyed endogenous cultures, including the red Indians in North America. endogenous people are either exterminated or forced to live in reservations. This is unforgotten history, especially after the Decolonization era, the decaying culture in the center and the rebirthing of cultures in the periphery.

This acculturation process, with the destruction of small c's for the hegemony of the big C, occurs on different levels. Language comes first. Since language is the way to communicate and cooperate, endogenous language is prohibited by the destruction of schools, and a new language of the newcomers is planted. Gradually, new generations are uprooted

from their own cultures and anchored in the alien one. Education comes second. The local history is erased and Mother France or Mother Russia come as substitute history. Knowledge about the self is minimized, knowledge about the other is maximized. Local customs and manners are considered folklore, to be observed by the other or fossilized in museums. Traditional law of the self yields to the civil code of the other. The centers of learning are in the center, attracting the novices from the periphery, a one-way learning, from the eternal master to the eternal disciple. The center produces and the periphery consumes. The capital C creates and the small c's acquire. The transfer of knowledge is a normal process, from those who have to those who have not. "Orientalism" took the lead and put the big C as an observer and small c's as observed. Stereotyped images forged by the center about the periphery multiplied and became substitute realities. The historical past of small cs is forgotten by the power of the mass-media of the center. The present is doomed. The story of mankind has been written for and by the big C, as the culmination of all cultures. Euro-centrism becomes law and order.

### **III. The Dialogue Model**

The dialogue model occurs when all cultures are equal, capital C's or small

c's, and better small c's since all cultures are the product of history, the creation of peoples and a man-made self-image. And since all peoples are equal in value, irrespective of color, cultures as national products are also equal in value.

In case of historical movements, or the birth and fall of Empires, cultures are also alike if the rising nation, prevailing over the decaying ones, presents a more universal code of ethics, in front of which all human beings, as individuals, are equal irrespective of the rise and fall of nations. In the model of conflict, historical movements between nations are invasions, while in the model of dialogue, their movements are movements of liberation from inequality, between nations or between rulers and ruled, to equality.

In this case, the particularities of the liberated nations are not destroyed, as in the conflict model, but rather are affirmed and defended. Customs and manners which are not contrary to the universal code of ethics are maintained. Those which are contrary to it disappear. This newly perfected particularism preserves individual and national identity. The universal code of ethics does not uproot peoples from their cultures, but on the contrary, it anchors them more and more. That was the case

with the expansion of Islam in Malaysia and Africa. Islamization means Malayization and Africanization.

In the dialogue model, the relations between cultures are not unilateral, from capital C to small c's, as in the conflict model, but multilateral, give and take. Learning is a double process between two masters or two disciples, mutual enrichment and collective creativity. To illustrate, the Arabesque comes from central Asia, that is, it existed before Islam and expressed the infinity in art after Islam. With Islam, the Roman arch became the Arab Arch, an expression of palm-trees.

The model of dialogue appears clearly, in history, in the relation between Islamic philosophy from one side and Greek, Christian and Jewish philosophy from the other side. Islamic philosophy borrowed from Greek philosophy, with its language, intellect, form, matter, cause, movement, substance, and accident, and used it to express new content. Greek logic was translated, commented and restructured within Islamic theory of knowledge. Greek ethics were also reaffirmed and completed. Islamic philosophy took the old language and gave it new meaning, new wine in old bottles. Arab translators were the medium, Christians in faith and Arabs in culture.

Afterwards, Jewish and Christian philosophers took the new meanings from Islamic philosophy and expressed them in their own proper languages. Moses communicated with the intellect like Mohammed. The Jewish Torah had been restructured according to the Shari'a. Islamic mysticism appeared in "Zohar." The Islamic Kalam was borrowed by Jewish thinkers, Saadia Gaon, Maimonides and others, to prove the veracity of Judaism. Christian philosophers in late scholasticism did likewise. Islamic Transcendence, Unity and Justice, the Universal code of ethics, the virtuous city, the immortality of the soul, all were behind Christian rationalism after Anselm, Abelard, and Thomas Aquinas. Islamic experimental sciences were taken as models by Duns Scotus, William of Occam and Roger Bacon. Dialogue even became a literary genre in the khuzari of Jehuda Halevi. The Muslim became the philosopher per excellence in Abelard's "Dialogue Between a Jew, a Christian and a Philosopher."

In the dialogue model, all equal cultures can participate in the common goals and share the same universal code, based on reason and the right to know, nature and the use of its laws, rights of man and peoples in freedom, social justice and welfare. All peoples and

cultures strive for the ideals of enlightenment, which appeared in the Andalusian symbiosis. In the model of conflict, these ideals are only for the self, not for the other, who should stay in ignorance, magic, fear, oppression, exploitation and poverty. The ideals of the European enlightenment were broken at the borders of Europe and even at the borders of every European nation, generating a model of conflict, while the ideals of Islamic Enlightenment went beyond peoples and nations, generating a model of dialogue.

#### **IV - Conclusion**

If the model of dialogue existed in the past and the model of conflict is more prevailing in the present, it is possible by certain means to recuperate the model of dialogue, as follows:

1- Continuous efforts to put an end to the polarization between capital C in the center and small c's in the periphery. A dialogue between cultures is only possible when they are equal. As far as the dialogue continues with the complex of superiority from the culture in the center and the complex of inferiority from the cultures in the periphery, the model of conflict prevails. The multiplication of the centers of cultures equal in value, permits two-way relations between them, give and take, a

process of cooperation, mutual learning and mutual enrichment. This way, every culture can learn what it has previously ignored.

2- This also requires an equal share in historiography. To the extent Europe is the center of history, in which all cultures culminate, the model of conflict prevails. Cultures of the periphery have to find an equal share in writing history. The history of the world did not begin in modern times. Seven thousand years of human culture cannot be reduced to one chapter prior to modern times, and even then, not recognized as the source, since the European culture is a new creation without precedents. In re-writing history, the European culture has to be reduced to its proper size, to return back to its natural geographic borders. Cultures in the periphery can then breath and expound from within, relieved of external pressure from without.

3- It is necessary to put to an end the stereotyped images of every culture, prevalent in the model of conflict, which cultures are presently creating of the other. It was normal from the central culture to distort the images of peripheral cultures as a means of colonization: images of ignorance, backwardness, underdevelopment, inflation, debts, corruption, dictatorship, torture, violation of human rights, tribalism, civil wars, terrorism,

poverty, overspending, the ugly Arab in London, the Harem, polygamy, patriarchal society, unemployment, dependency, in short, the slave. It was also normal as a self-defense, in the process of decolonization, to draw another stereotyped reverse image of the Colonizer: Colonialism, imperialism, Zionism, capitalism, exploitation, monopoly, militarism, racism, Eurocentrism, arrogance, genocide, materialism, in short, the master. Since decolonization occurred, some of these images have become irrelevant. Once cultures become equal, the glory of each culture appears: science and art in China, mathematics and ethics in India, politics and Administration in Persia, Science and philosophy in the Muslim World. The role of the mass-media is decisive. New Orientalism and new cultural anthropology are needed.

Humanity has had enough of the model of conflict. The model of dialogue is within reach.

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