The Clash of Civilizations Thesis and Religious Responses

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Abstract

The article describes key aspects of Samuel Huntington's ''Clash of Civilizations'' thesis. It acknowledges the way in which that thesis has picked up on some key changes in relation to the role of religion in public life and, especially, in international relations. But it also critiques the thesis for its ''essentializing'' and ''bloc'' approach to cultures and societies, arguing that such an approach does not take sufficient account of the differences and sometimes fault-lines and conflicts within societies and cultural groups. For what might characterise appropriate religiously informed responses to Huntington's thesis, the article proposes an approach based on four ''keynotes'' of ''modesty'', ''integrity'', ''realism'' and ''distinctiveness''.

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The Re-Emergence of Religion

1989 was the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was also the year in which The Satanic Verses (Rushdie, 1988) controversy became public in the UK and then went global. In that context, the British socialist political elder statesman, Tony Benn (in The Guardian, 7.4.89), offered the following reflection:

''Now, all of a sudden, arguments which had almost disappeared into the mists of time have to come into sharp focus and are hotly contested across the world, involving diplomatic relations, trade arrangements and stretching into the heart of religious communities where people of different religious convictions have to live side by side.''

In this febrile atmosphere, with the disappearance of the ''enemy other'' of either ''communism'' or ''capitalism'', a number of commentators began to identify new potential ''enemies'' on the global map and did so by prophesying coming cultural and religious conflicts. Especially well known for this was Samuel Huntington, and more specifically his thesis about the so-called ''Clash of Civilizations''.

Huntington and the Clash of Civilizations

The origins of Huntington's thesis can be found in a 1992 lecture given by him at the American Enterprise Institute. Perhaps significantly for how the thesis eventually came to be used in justification of certain foreign and military policy stances, the terminology of ''clash of civilizations'' had previously been used by the American Orientalist, Bernard Lewis, in a 1990 Atlantic Monthly article entitled ''The Roots of Muslim Rage''.

The thesis as Huntington was to develop it after his American Enterprise Institute lecture was first published in the journal Foreign Affairs under the title of ''The Clash of Civilizations?'' (Huntington, 1993). That article was then followed up by a book of similar, but in fact not precisely the same, title. The title of the book was to become The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of Global Order (Huntington, 1997).

In view of the talismanic status that Huntington's basic thesis had by then begun to acquire in a number of political circles - especially among the so-called ''Neocons'' in the USA – both the addition to, and the subtraction from, the original article title are significant. The subtraction was the removal of the question mark associated with the original title. What began as a set of questions had now developed into a thesis to be more sharply advocated. And with the removal of the question mark, another dimension had been added – namely that of a concern with global order; or perhaps more specifically, the implications of Huntington's thesis for US global hegemony.

In considering Huntington's thesis it is important to bear in mind that his thesis became a lightning rod for controversy and generated more responses than any other essay published in the history of the journal <u>Foreign Affairs</u>. Because of this, it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish what *Huntington* actually said from what is written *about* him and his thesis. It is also important to recognise that others may share aspects of Huntington's perspective without necessarily subscribing to his overall thesis; or certainly without subscribing to the way in which the thesis was used as justification for particular foreign policy stances and military actions.

Therefore during the period in which Huntington was writing there were other – at least at the time - less well known voices who, while sharing something of Huntington's analysis about the emerging importance of culture and religion within the field of international politics, did not necessarily share his specific evaluation of civilizational blocs, or the use to which some of this thinking was put by certain politicians. One of these was the later scourge of British New Labour Government economics, the now politician and Liberal Democrat Treasury spokesperson, Vince Cable. In a 1994 booklet entitled <u>The World's New Fissures: Identities in Crisis</u> (1994: 4-5) Cable had put forward an argument that:

> The thesis advanced here is that as the old division between left and right fades away a new one is appearing, centred on different ways in which people define their identity.

and also that:

> ...now there are special reasons why cultural identity - whether based on religion, language, race, region, nation, clan or tribe - is gaining greater importance as a vehicle for political interests and grievances.

Cable furthermore argued that the rise of this politics of identity was to be located within the impact of globalisation. Globalisation, he pointed out, reduces the significance of the nation state as an intermediate political and economic system whilst increasing the significance of international and universal factors as well as highly localised ones.

This kind of emphasis on culture and religion was in considerable contrast to the position of around a half a century ago. In the 1960s, in both the so-called "First" and "Second" Worlds, there had been a strong sense that religion might fade away from the public sphere, if not perhaps disappear altogether, through the impact either of industrial capitalism and the consumer society in the West, or that of atheistic communism and materialism in the East.

However, this disappearance did not happen. Furthermore, as religion re-appeared especially in the international sphere, it did so in ways that were strongly associated with

conflict and violence. And in general public consciousness, at least, this has often been associated with Islam. Thus one could refer to Nagorno-Karabakh, Chechenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, 9/11, 7/7, and Afghanistan. Each of these is etched firmly into our contemporary religious and political consciousness as bloody episodes that have involved at least dimensions relating to religion and culture.

It is these events, followed by 9/11, the Bali bombing, the Madrid Bombing, 7/7 in London, and other similar atrocities or ''near misses'' that have led to a view among a number of political circles – and especially among the so-called ''Neocons'' in the USA - that Huntington's thesis has been vindicated. Of course, alongside these conflicts that involve Muslims, there has also been the continuing running sore of the national conflict in Northern Ireland connecting in communal terms with Protestants and Catholics; the armed insurgency in the Punjab for an independent state Sikh state of Khalistan; the Sri Lankan conflict over Tamil Eelam in the largely Hindu north of Sri Lanka; and so on.

But what is Huntington's thesis? Initially it was an argument developed in response to Francis Fukuyama's (1989, 1992) earlier thesis of ''The End of History'' which was also influential in the post-Cold War period (and was another essay, the title of which when developed into a book, lost its original question mark). Broadly speaking, Fukuyama had argued that, on the other side of the collapse of Communism, there were no real ''alternatives'' left except the further technocratic development of the western economic and democratic model. Fukuyama's argument was, of course, advanced before the near global meltdown of the international banking and finance system through which the world has recently lived!

Unlike Fukuyama, Huntington thought that while ideological options had come to an end, this meant that the world had reverted to a pre-existing - and what he argued was an historically more ''normal'' - state of cultural and religious conflict, and that this would become the main basis for conflict in the future. Thus, in his original article, Huntington (1993: 22) argued that:

> It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.

What is notable about Huntington's thesis is that it depends upon a prior position concerning the possibility of identifying and delineating civilizational groupings. In identifying

these Huntington, like the British historian Arnold Toynbee (1956) before him, seems to give some primacy to shared religion, but also to some extent to linguistic similarity as well as to geographical proximity. However, there is some inconsistency in how Huntington approaches civilizational classification although, broadly speaking, he identifies the following civilizational groups:

- *Western civilization* (with Latin America and Russia in question re Orthodox world)

- *The Eastern world of Buddhist, Sinic, Hindu and Japonic groups*

- *The Muslim world of the ''Greater Middle East''* (stretching across Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, to Indonesia etc)

- *Sub-Saharan Africa*

Huntington also speaks of what he calls ''cleft'' countries: in other words those that embody tension between the civilizations as, for example, in the case of India (with its Hindu majority and substantial Muslim minority), and the Ukraine (with its Western Catholic and Orthodox regions). Out of all this, Huntington also identifies what he calls ''*challenger civilizations*'' – and these are the ''*Sinic*'' and the ''*Islamic*''. The ''*Sinic*'' challenge he sees as driven by the emergence of Chinese economic power, but under girded by a strong cultural identity, and to which the wider region might be likely to ally itself under Chinese primacy. The ''*Islamic*'' challenge he sees as being driven by a huge population expansion and by internal and external instability linked with what he calls ''*Islamic resurgence*''. He also perceives what he calls an emergent ''*Sino-Islamic connection*'' based on both civilizations having shared conflicts with the West - particularly in terms of models of human rights and democracy.

He then identifies Russia, India, and Japan as ''*swing civilizations*'' that might ally with one or other civilizational bloc. He also speaks of what he calls ''*torn countries*'', which are countries with historical origins in one civilization, but which are seeking to affiliate with another. An example of this would be Turkey's aim to join the European Union which, if it comes about, could be the first successful cross-affiliation. Finally, Huntington argued that the conflicts that might occur could be either ''*fault line*'' conflicts or ''*core state*'' conflicts. ''*Fault line*'' conflicts he sees as local between adjacent states of different civilizations, while ''*core state*'' conflicts would take place on a global level between the major states of different civilizations.

A key part of Huntington's thesis of relevance to our overall topic and context today is that he argues that civilizational conflicts are particularly prevalent between Muslims and non-Muslims and that ''*Islam has bloody borders*'' (Huntington, 1993: 35). Huntington dates this back to the Ottoman military thrust into Europe. He argues that what he sees as this proclivity to conflict is fuelled by a number of factors. Firstly, he argues that both Islam and Christianity are missionary religions that seek the conversion of others. Secondly, that both are what he calls ''*universal*'' or ''*all-or-nothing*'' religions in terms of truth claims.

Thirdly, that both are *"teleological"* in that they claim to offer solutions to the goals of human existence. In his book he further developed these lines of argument to contend that the bloodiest conflicts of the twenty-first century would be those to do with the Western-Islamic clash. The shock of 9/11 - which many people struggled to make sense of - seemed for many to confirm Huntington's analysis.

"The Clash of Civilizations": An Evaluation

That there has evidently been something going on here in terms of what one might call shifting "fault-lines" in the social, political and economic worlds needs to be acknowledged. But it is arguable that the approach taken by Huntington - and even more so by those who have translated his thought into policy stances – has had a tendency to over-simplify, essentialise and reify what has been occurring in terms of the division of the world into a number of "cultural blocs".

This kind of approach to interpreting the world of "the other" was one that those who were involved in East-West reconciliation work during the Cold War will recall. In those days what was the popular Western image of a monolithic Communist "bloc" was a big over-simplification. The differences between Yugoslavia and the German Democratic Republic were profound. Even among Communist-ruled countries with shared membership of the Warsaw Pact there were substantial differences. Because of that, during the Cold War it would have been more accurate to have referred to "spheres of interest" or "spheres of influence" rather than to "blocs".

So, also, in relation to Huntington's notion of *"civilizational blocs"*, one might more accurately speak of civilizational, cultural and religious "spheres of interest" or "spheres of influence" within which there is a much more complex, contested and fluid situation than any more "solidified" notion of a "bloc". Moreover, as argued by the German political philosopher, Dieter Senghaas (2002) in his book <u>The Clash Within Civilizations: Coming to Terms with Cultural Conflicts</u>, the main cultural and religious fault-lines that *do* exist actually run *through*, between and *within* geo-political and cultural groupings rather than *between* them.

Such an understanding of the dynamics of the contemporary world is closer to what had already been presciently identified around half a century ago by the historian Arnold Toynbee (1956: 139) who argued that culturally and religiously the world was moving from what could be described as the *"pattern of a patchwork quilt"* to what could more accurately be described as the *"texture of a piece of shot silk"*. Or, as the American scholar of religion Diana Eck (2000: 135) has put it in a recent essay on "Dialogue and Method: Reconstructing the Study of Religion", the map of what she calls our current *"georeligious reality"* cannot *"be color-coded as to its Christian, Muslim, Hindu identity"*.

In the light of all this, perhaps the real challenges of the present may be less fearsome that the image of monolithic cultural blocs reminiscent of the Cold War enemy images

tends to evoke. But, if the issues may be less fearsome than such ''bloc'' thinking suggests, they may also in reality be more *problematic* and *intractable* precisely *because* of their complexity. They may also be *more universal* because they affect not only the borderlands between different societies, but also the challenge of living together with diversity *within all* societies.

Partly in critique of Huntington, alternative concepts have been developed. Thus former President Katami of Iran proposed a ''Dialogue of Civilizations'', which was taken up by the United Nations in naming 2001 as the Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations. More recently, at the 59th General Assembly of the UN in 2005, Spanish President Zapatora and Turkish Prime Minister, Erdogan, proposed the ''Alliance of Civilizations'' initiative.

However, while there are alternative initiatives such as the above, it is important to acknowledge that there are real issues here - in which religious traditions, individuals, communities, groups, organisations are caught up because of what might be called the ''culturization'' and/or ''religionization'' of conflict. And in the context of this, there are real questions for how religions might respond? So, in the remainder of this paper I want to try to briefly outline four keynotes that I think should characterise any response or helpful contribution that the religions may make. And these four keynotes are, I would suggest: ''modesty'', ''integrity'', ''realism'' and ''distinctiveness''.

Modesty

An important starting point for *any* response from religious people is an appropriate *modesty* on the part of the followers of these great world religions. The high ideals of the religions may be one thing, but no religion exists in the abstract. The individuals, groups and communities that have actualised the religious traditions of the world have been historically ambiguous. Religions *have* undoubtedly contributed positive impulses to the development of civilizations themselves. But they have also exacerbated and sometimes created serious conflicts and suffering. Both realities need to be acknowledged.

In the Cold War era, supporters of a socialist political and economic alternative to capitalism had to deal with the issues arising from the contradictions between their ideals of socialism and the historical societies of what became known as ''really existing socialism''. In relation to how Marxist-Leninist one-party rule actually functioned, many socialists and Marxists tended either to idealise the picture or else, like the Trotskyists, to denounce the realities of ''really existing socialism'' as not being the real thing. As with ''really existing socialism'', among its self-uncritical supporters there is a lot of ''hot air'' talked about ''really existing religion''. Religious believers can be as self-deludingly in love with their image of themselves as some Marxists and socialists were. Or, perhaps more dangerously still, they can cynically proclaim the efficacy of their religion in order to maintain its influence and power over the lives of those who live within its sphere, whilst no longer really believing in what they proclaim.

Like many socialists and Marxists, many religious ''mainstreamers'' cannot, it seems, come to terms with how they are actually seen and experienced by those of other religions or none. They often cannot properly see and acknowledge the force of the secular critique about the responsibility of religious communities for injustice of various kinds, from ethnic violence through to domestic violence. Others, like those Trotskyites who wished to maintain that they were the true and ''pure'' exponents of socialism or Marxism, try to find comfort in distinguishing the ''true Christianity'' or the ''true Islam'' from ''really existing Christianity'' or ''really existing Islam''. While one can understand the wish of this argument to separate out the original vision of religions from the negative forms of their historical actualisation, in the end this will not do. Religions do not exist in the abstract and have to be evaluated by the actual effects of those who, in history, identify themselves with these religions, including those whom some religious believers would rather did not bear the name of their religion.

At the same time, while acknowledging the betrayals of humanity by religious communities in human history it is important to assess what, positively, the religions can bring and also to question the failures of the secular movements of the previous century. It is often argued that it has been the rise of the secular spirit, and its adoption by states and societies, that has enabled some degree of religious co-existence and overcome the inheritance of religious absolutism. In the judgement of post-Enlightenment secular liberals, religions have been responsible for an enormous amount of bloodshed and human suffering and for this reason it is safer to keep them marginalised from public life. That there is considerable truth in this judgement must be acknowledged.

But is there not also a too easy moral superiority among secularist critics of religion? Indeed, it can cogently be argued that the formation of modern nation-states and the operation of modern secular ideologies have led to just as much, if not more, human suffering than have states founded upon religion. Thus, while acknowledging the betrayals of humanity by religious communities in human history the phenomenon of the secular nation-state can hardly be uncritically glorified in the light of the 20th century that saw the nationalistic blood-letting of the First World War; the impact of colonialism and capitalism upon the Two Thirds World; the gas chambers of Nazism; the gulags of Stalinism; as well as the rape of the planet caused by the unsustainable and headlong technological exploitation of finite natural resources to meet the demands of profit. Therefore, alongside a critical self-evaluation on the part of religious groups, what might perhaps also be required is a critical re-evaluation of what is meant by the ''secular'' (see Weller, 2006).

The right not to believe has been an important social and religious gain and religious people have often needed secular critique. There is, for religious traditions and groups, no going back behind this. At the same time, both religious and non-religious people need to recognise that the notion of a ''secular state'' is highly context-specific. How far a secular state actually allows or not the full participation and contribution of religious organisations and groups depends upon the question of what is meant by ''secular'' in the context of a particular societies and states.

''Laïcité'' in France is different from ''secular state'' in India, and also the separation of Church and state in the USA, and different again from Kemalism in Turkey, and from the position in China today. Thus, among other possibilities, the idea of a ''secular state'' may imply one or more of the systematic attempt to exclude religions from the public sphere; the creation of an arena in which religious participation is encouraged but religious communalisms are challenged; or it may give constitutional embodiment to the non-establishment of particular religions and to the promotion of religious freedom. In this connection, one of the significant conclusions to emerge from a November 1998 Council of Europe seminar on the topic of ''Religion and the Integration of Immigrants'' was that: *''It was underlined that the use of the term 'secular', referring to the relationship between the State and religion, should be re examined and clarified on a pan-European level, with a view to reaching a common understanding.''* (Council of Europe, 1999: 173)

But if religions *do* have positive something to offer, this cannot be on the basis of any ''triumphalism'' over and against the secular in which religions are naïve about their historical and contemporary record. To argue for this is not to suggest that religions need to have a kind of ''false modesty'' in which self-criticism leads to indulgence in superficial guilt or ''breast-beating''. Such an approach, in contrast with that of an appropriate and proper modesty, does not facilitate positive developments, but rather leads to the paralysis that leaves the world to the mercy of realpolitik devoid of values. Rather, an appropriate modesty is one that is based on recognising limitations and failings, and on being ready to share with and learn from people of other religions and none; while also being ready to make a contribution based on the integrity of what is distinctive about one's own religious tradition.

Integrity

Self-critique within particular religions does need to be informed by careful listening to those in other religions as well as to those from outside of religions. But in the final analysis it needs to be based upon the *integrity* of the religion concerned. While religions do, as historical communities, have a highly problematic record in relation to the rights of humanity, ultimately they do *also* point to something *beyond* themselves.

It is in the light of that to which they point, and to which they seek to give historical expression but with which they are not completely identified, that religions ultimately live. It is also in the light of that which they believe that they themselves will as much and, in fact, more so than others, be judged. It is such an in-built critique against the absolutisation of their own claims when evaluated alongside their actualisation of these in historical communities that has given religions a remarkable capacity for self-critique and renewal. It is a capacity that has been evidenced over the centuries as prophetic and charismatic figures have arisen from within each of the religions who have critiqued their own religions from within in as strong, if not stronger, terms than those mounting a critique from outside.

This capacity for self-critique and renewal is of great importance in the context of the rise of identity politics and the potential role of religion in this. It is this which counteracts what can otherwise be a tendency for the traditional Christian affirmation of ''Jesus is Lord'' to become a tribal call of triumphalism over and against people of other than Christian religions, when what it *should* be is a challenge to those who confess Jesus as Lord as to whether they are *actually living* their lives in the spirit of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth. Such an understanding of the importance of self-critique might also lead to asking the question of whether, when crowds of Muslims cry ''God is Great'', they might thereby be expressing collective anger and frustration about their position of felt impotence in a world of power seemingly ranged against them as much or more than affirming trust and confidence in the One whom Islam affirms is ''the Compassionate, the Merciful, the Lord of the Universe, the Ruler of the Day of Judgement''.

In contrast with approaches of impotent anger or of triumphalism, the integrity of religions demands an acknowledgement of their very real diversity and resistance to an unjustifiable reification of dynamic and diverse *''imagined communities''* (see Anderson, 1983). In his classic 1978 book, The Meaning and End of Religion the historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith famously protested against reification into ''religions'' of what he prefer to speak of in terms of the *''personal faith''* of individuals and *''cumulative traditions''* of groups of people. As long ago as 1974, in a neglected, but still resonant, essay on ''Communalism and the Social Structure of Religion'' Trevor Ling (1974: 61) argued that: *''The fact that such/terms have been invented and have gained currency is no guarantee that they refer to real objective recognisable entities, each possessing a sufficiently high degree of internal unity to justify the degree of external differentiation which the terms imply''.*

''Community'' is, of course, the now near ubiquitous word of public discourse that is pressed into service to denote the dimension of religious life connected with self-identity. However, increasingly, both in social and political debates and in academic studies, the uses of this word have a tendency to mystify rather than to clarify. If the description ''the X community'' is used as anything other than a shorthand notation for a particular stream of religious life, it can portray a misleading picture of assumed homogeneity that is often significantly at variance with the much more complex, multi-layered, sometimes fragmented and even fractured realities that it seeks to denote.

At the same time, the postmodern penchant for deconstruction can be taken too far when used to deny the utility of anything that goes beyond the isolated self. While it is no doubt the case that all ''imagined communities'' can be deconstructed in relation to the diversities of belief, gender, age, social class, and sexual orientation, the fact that collective identities are appealed to indicates that they do function in a social way. By imagining these identities, they are actually brought into social being and have social effects, whether they ''should'' be recognised or not. The need is to recognise this. The danger, as Ling has argued (1974: 66), is that such constructions of sharply defined religious identities *''arise out of concealed quasi-nationalisms, and they advance concealed quasi-nationalistic causes.''*

A focus on religious rights and equity, unbalanced by the corrective of the keynote of integrity can lead religions into being overly concerned with pressing for their rights. Of course, there are good reasons for why religious groups should be able to claim and assert their rights to freedom of belief and its manifestation as guaranteed in various international human rights instruments. There are also sound arguments in terms of equity and inclusion that discrimination on the grounds of religion should be taken as seriously and tackled as vigorously as discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, gender and disability.

But there is a real danger that religions might be seduced by the politics of identity into competitive forms of communalism that sacrifice the original creative visions of the traditions to a contemporary politics of identity that all too easily becomes an identity politics in which the absolutisation of such identities results in projects for the ''religious cleansing'' of those with ''other'' identities. Such projects can take shape in forms of proselytism that, while eschewing violence and legal suppression, nevertheless deny the ''other'' their religious freedom to be themselves in psychological, social and religious terms.

In more extreme cases, in the Balkans we have seen how such ''communalist'' projects can issue in the physical violence of recent attempts to carry out ''religious cleansing'' through the enforced geographical displacement of the religious ''other'' and/or their literal liquidation. The dangers are clear. Religions could develop an identity politics that is more concerned with their own ''rights'' than with the spiritual roots by which the historical manifestations of religions are ultimately to be judged.

Nevertheless, as the Christian theologian Robin Gill argued in his 1975 book, The Social Context of Theology: A Methodological Enquiry, theological variables can also become social determinates. In other words, religions are *agents* as well as *actors* within social processes and there is nothing inevitable about them going down the communalist road. From within their own identity and tradition, religions do have the means of critique to preserve them from these dangers.

Thus, within the Hebrew scriptural tradition that is shared by both Jews and Christians, there is a powerful prophetic critique of the way in which the call of Yahweh to form a covenant people can all too easily be transmuted into a ''politics of peoplehood'' which forgets that, alongside ''the chosen people'' of the Hebrews the Lord also calls ''Egypt, my people'' and speaks of ''Assyria, whom I created'' (Isaiah 19 v. 25). It also contains a critique that reminds the people when Temple is destroyed and they are exile, that God is the God of the nations and not of one place, time or people to the exclusion of all others, and that this God can raise up and use within His purposes even foreign and pagan powers, such as the Persian emperor Cyrus (Isaiah 45). Finally, there is the denunciation of those who pressed the transcendent into the service of an identity politics when they chanted ''The Temple of the Lord, The Temple of the Lord'' (Jeremiah 7 v. 4) as though this somehow granted them absolute security and absolved them of any accountability in relation to the demands of justice.

Realism

When reflecting on the response that religions might make to Huntington's thesis, there can sometimes be a tendency to take refuge in generalisations about religions being bearers of sources of value that are needed in the world and to proclaim these loudly, without acknowledging the diversity among the religions, or the problem of how their values are translatable into the everyday world.

In fact, religions have profound differences - at least in how they wish to actualise apparently shared values. For example, it is often said ''we all believe in the family''. But do we? Or at least, do we all do so in the same way? At the same time, while there may be real differences about the ways in which their values are translated into specific ethical stances, religions do, nevertheless, hold to a number of absolute convictions. In contrast to a post-modernist ethical bricolage, the values espoused within the various religious traditions are not up for general negotiation. Therefore, for example, from the perspective of religions, it does matter - and absolutely, not just relatively - whether the poorest in the world die as a consequence of the political and economic systems that maintain the ''comfort zones'' of the rich.

Thus, religions are a reminder that the way in which a society lives and organises itself is neither natural nor inevitable, nor is it the only possible way for a society to be. Rather, it is the way that a society has chosen for itself. Religions bear witness to things that cannot be seen, touched, smelled, tasted and heard, but which are essential for a more balanced perspective on what is experienced in these ways. In so far as they allow themselves to be informed and shaped by the originating visions embodied within them, religions can offer important alternative visions to profit, unlimited consumption and notions of endless progress as the criteria by which social life is organised.

All of this is of great importance in a political context where, among mainstream political parties few, if any, real alternatives are being offered to the dominant and underlying global economic system of market capitalism and the choices that are implied are therefore only (while still, relatively speaking, important) between more or less unbridled versions of the same thing. But the difficult challenge that religions face is how to translate their visions of the ''ultimate'' into the ''penultimate'' without losing their integrity.

At the same time, religions cannot expect perfection in this world and any contribution that they might hope could make a real impact on the social, political and economic structures of the world, needs to be *realistic*. It is not enough to do the religious equivalent of proclaiming how good apple pie is. To paraphrase Marx, the point of religion is not to theorise about the world and the people within it, but to facilitate change in both. But change requires engagement with the world, and not just proclamation of values to it, nor - however valuable this may be for modelling something different - simply the creation of sub-cultural alternatives based on religious values.

In many societies there are once again increasing opportunities for engagement of

that kind. For example, in the UK, as the Local Government Association's <u>Faith and Community: A Good Practice Guide For Local Authorities</u> puts it (2002a: 3, para 2.3), religions are often once again recognised by public authorities as *"sources of values and commitment"* As the Local Government Association's Guidance on Community Cohesion (2002b: 21) expresses it, "All major faiths promote equality and respect for others as a fundamental value. In most cases, at a personal and community level, this translates into good community relations and integrity in public life. Such values can be a real resource in the practical implementation of community cohesion strategies."

But in such opportunities, there are also tensions. This is because Government, and also political and human rights movements, when they want religions as partners, naturally want them for political and practical purposes. But religious groups must be able to feel that they can contribute on the basis of an integrity rooted in their own self-understanding. To be realistic does not mean to abandon the visions and dreams that inform religious perspectives on the world, but it does entail the need to take the risk and to accept the responsibility of trying to translate ultimate values into penultimate historical projects and therefore also accepting the possibility of getting it wrong.

It is in the place between the original visions of religions and their historical actualisations that the realistic contributions of religions might be found. This entails their living within what the German language gives good expression to as a *Spannungsfeld* (field of tension). Within this, "really existing religions" have to find a way of living in the "in-between" of the provisionality of their "now" and the ultimacy of the visions and truth-claims that inspire them. They have to find a way of negotiating between the absolute seriousness of an engaged religious commitment, an intellectual humility and ethical self-criticism together with a willingness to critique their historical forms of organisation.

Distinctiveness

In contrast with an earlier era in which religions were more generally frozen out of the public sphere, one of the interesting things about the last decade or two has been how, in many contexts, both nationally and internationally, there are now initiatives to re-connect the institutions and initiatives public life with religions. Thus, in the USA there has been the development of "faith based" partnership initiatives in civil society (see Wuthnow, 2004). In England and Wales, the "New Labour" Government has encouraged local authorities to engage religions fully in Local City Partnerships and similar initiatives (see Weller, 2005).

In many ways this is not surprising. One of the lessons of the failure to build politically and economically alternative states in the Europe of the twentieth century was that healthy states need a healthy civil society. In the context of a general fragmentation and weakening of voluntary forms of association, religions remain a key form of belonging beyond the individual and their immediate family. In contrast to many other forms of vol-

untary association based on mutual self-interest and/or a single shared characteristic, the religious sector of civil society includes people with wide varieties of other social, economic and ethnic belongings.

On a national level, in an era in which national governments of all kinds are more modest about what can be done centrally and about their need for social partners to implement social policy there has been a growing emphasis on the importance of what has been identified in the work of Robert Putnam (2003a, 2003b) as *"social capital"*. In that context, there has also emerged a recognition that religions, their communities and organisations have extensive human and physical resources with geographical "reach" and that they play substantial role within the community and voluntary sector of civil society. In general, religions wish to take up these opportunities. But in taking them there is a danger that religions will simply be seen, and if not careful could allow themselves to become, one voluntary sector group among others. As will hopefully be realised from what was argued earlier on, to argue that they should not simply be this is not at the same time to argue or imply that religions are somehow superior. But while there is a need for religions to be realistic about the ways in which governmental bodies will relate to them, if the contribution that religions might make is to be informed by integrity, then any such contribution does need to be characterised by the distinctiveness that the religions bring.

That this is possible can again be illustrated from the UK by the Local Government Association's Faith and Community report. While noting that *"Faith groups are an important part of the voluntary and community sector"*, this report (Local Government Association, 2002a: 3) also recognises that they have *"distinctive characteristic and potential of their own."* Government wants religions as partners for practical and political purposes. Religious groups may well offer partnership in good governance because of their wish give historical and practical expression to their commitments in relation to what they understand to be the ultimate and the unconditioned roots of their tradition. But it is also precisely because of the nature of these roots that religious groups may become suspicious and resistant to any possibility that they are merely co-opted into government agendas. Governments tend to want dialogical partners that are "safe" and will deal with relatively "safe" topics in "safe" ways.

Religions do have important - albeit often significantly differing - things to contribute about, for example, values in relation to families and their role within society. Contributions of this kind are likely to be welcomed by the "powers that be" in the context of general concerns about the creation of stable environments within which children and young people can be inducted into becoming mature participants in the rights and responsibilities of adult members of society. Governments welcome values for their contribution to community cohesion. But what about values that disturb the status quo in service of social justice? - or even more sharply, in the service of economic justice?

Thus it can seem that, if they want the participation of religions at all, Governments can too often want their participation only or, primarily, for purely utilitarian or instrumen-

talist purposes. There can be problems of potentially dangerous distortion if the ultimate is rather made subservient to the penultimate and the unconditioned to the conditioned. This is because utilitarian purposes often ignore or try to filter the disturbing aspects of religions that challenge the status quo in favour of those aspects that appear to support and confirm it, thus ''domesticating'' religions. Do governmental ''powers that be'' look for, and even try to create, ''mainstream'' and ''establishment'' dialogue partners that only mirror their own image? Might such dialogue partners become detached from their constituencies and promote only mutual self-confirmation? Such ''instrumentalisation'' and ''domestication'' of religions undermines their integrity, and it is one of the reasons why religions do well to resist any suspicion of co-option and the governmental ''powers that be'' also do well to avoid both the reality and the possible (mis)perception of that.

At the same time, failure on the part of religions to engage with the public sphere on the basis of their distinctiveness as religions is not an expression of realism rooted in integrity. Rather, it is more a symptom of either a false modesty or of a reluctance to accept responsibility within the contingent ambiguities of history.

In the international sphere, acting as part of the Non-Governmental Organisation sector, religious organisations and groups have global networks, perspectives that can offer alternative means of communication and information. In the days of the Cold War in Europe, the Christian Churches on both sides of the Berlin Wall often functioned as an important bridge of alternative information and perspectives in contrast to the peddling of enemy images. So, also today, in the context of a dominant ''clash of civilizations'' ideology, religious organisations can offer important alternative channels for challenging simplifications in relation to global ''blocs'' of religions. In this they can give important reminders that there are, for example, Christian Palestinians and Christian Iraqis (see Rassam, 2005), and that there are millions of Muslims in the ''West'', not least in the European Union and in the USA.

In the contemporary world, we are at one and same time seeing the massive extension of the media through satellite and cable TV and internet technologies, and yet also the severe narrowing of what is actually represented through these media. As between them, CNN and Rupert Murdoch's media empire carve up the news networks, religious communities and organisations, being part of global communities of faith, can become important alternative channels of information and communication. They present perspectives that challenge the individual escapism and collective selfishness of consumer societies. But they can also offer more complex pictures of the diversity of these societies than the simplistic demonisation of them that, for those who suffer on the underside of history, can be an all too seductive simplification of the reality of the ''West'' (see Pearse, 2003).

Conclusion

In closing, I want to end with something from the Indian Christian and former Director of the Dialogue Unit of the World Council of Churches, Stanley Samartha. In an essay of his

on the topic of ''Religious Identities in a Secular State'', Samartha (1991:57) argued for the importance of maintaining a distinctive vocation of religions over and against both the vacuous superficiality of consumer secularism and the dangerous forms limited belonging based upon blood and ethnicity:

> In an age dominated by science and secularism one of the tasks of genuinely religious people is to draw attention to the Mystery of transcendence, a centre of values, a source of meaning, an object of loyalty beyond the smaller loyalties to one's particular caste language or religion.

Finally, in words taken from the scriptural writings of the religious tradition with which the writer is personally identified - that of the Christian tradition - I would offer three footnotes. For what religions might contribute to inter-cultural and inter-civilisational dialogue: ''Where there is no vision, the people perish'' (Proverbs 29 v. 18). For the actual contributions made by religions in this field: ''By their fruits you will know them'' (Matthew 7 v. 20). And in dealing with the power structures of the world: ''Be wise as serpents and gentle as doves'' (Matthew 10 v. 16).

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