

Cultural Co-Existence and “Wars of Religion”

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In order to address the subject in current times, it is better to invert the order of the two concepts, and start by the “Wars of Religion,” very properly put between inverted commas. The reason for these commas is quite obvious: no real war of religion, with the meaning normally attached to such a type of conflict, is happening now, at least if one is thinking about the armed strikes that get most attention in the news.

In fact, unless we look back some centuries, it is difficult to find a typical war of religion, even if the situations of Algeria in the 1990s, and North-Western Pakistan nowadays seem to approach that concept. After the gigantic Arabian-Islamic expansion in Asia, Africa and

the Iberian Peninsula, the failed medieval Christian Crusades, or the Thirty Years' War in Europe, the last of which led to the principle of non-intervention in internal affairs, the clash of ideologies that most resembled religions was the Cold War. Similar, but not equal, to a typical war of religions has been the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East. While keeping its ethnic-nationalistic foundations between the two immediate adversaries—the State of Israel and the Palestinians—, this tragic, unsolved question, supported with bias by outside powers, substantially feeds the deep-rooted, biblical dispute between Judaism and Islam worldwide.

The wars in former Yugoslavia, especially those in Croatia and Bosnia, as well as the Gulf War of 1991, which gave inspiration to Huntington's article of 1993 entitled "The Clash of Civilizations?," only remotely resembled a war of religions. The reason why journalists and some academics immediately absorbed that pre-existing idea, updated and expanded by Huntington, was precisely its simplistic approach. With its eloquent three-worded title, the article seemed to explain everything people were witnessing and could not understand.¹ Never mind if many asser-

1 Like Fukuyama's "The End of History?" in 1989, the influential text by Samuel Huntington was his article of 1993 (published in *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993). His book, *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996), lacked the freshness of "novelty" (like Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, published in 1992).

tions in the text were mistaken (is there a Latin American or African specific or unified "civilization"?), concepts adapted by reduction (is the Islamic world a monolith? "Orthodox" Greece is not part of "the West"?), and historical facts chosen *à la carte* to fit the points to be stressed. After all, mistakes, reduction and purposefully chosen facts as illustration of the author's arguments are common to every analytical piece of non-fiction.

Unfortunately some interpreters, and common people, used the expression—if not Huntington's more detailed, albeit distorted, description of the whole idea—as the new paradigm of international relations. True or wrong, the three words were effective and timely. Since 1989, scholars and students were eager to replace the overcome, also simplistic, paradigm of the Cold War. Like almost everybody else, they disregarded the question mark used in the title. The real problem materialized when political advisers of powerful decision-makers seemed to take this essentially epistemological model of as a "road map." These leaders opted for courses of action that seemed to fit into the mold of a "clash of civilizations," and of "civilizations" as synonymous with "religions," as Huntington viewed them. On doing so, they made uncountable blunders, which deeply aggravated the whole world situation.

WARS OF RELIGIONS AND OTHER CLASHES

No one can deny that the Bosnian war had an important religious aspect. To the extent that the main ele-

ment of Bosniac “difference” in the region was its Islamic faith, that historical heritage was widely manipulated by the Bosnian leaders as well as their friends and foes, before, during and after that war of independence. Bosniacs, as we all know, were but the Slavic people long-established in that part of the Balkans who had converted to Islam under the Ottoman Empire. Oddly enough it was Tito, leader of the Communist League of Yugoslavia, who recognized them as a “nation,” equating religion and nationality, establishing a republic within the *avant la lettre* “multiculturalist” Yugoslav federation—a socialist republic which included other ethnic groups within its own internal borders. Everybody also knows that, during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in the period 1993-95, support from Islamic groups were vital for the Bosniacs, cut off from the rest of the world by disastrously awkward United Nations’ sanctions.

The war of independence of Croatia from Yugoslavia had also had a religious connotation. A former part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, Croatia was historically Catholic, while the Serbs, identified with Yugoslavia, had Christian Orthodox origins. The fact that Bosniacs and Croatians got together in the later stages of the war and formed a common Entity, different from the Srpska Republic, in the new independent State of Bosnia-Herzegovina, is already a clear indication that the war had not been a “war of civilizations.” Furthermore, when those wars took place, in the first half of the nineties, all of

those directly involved had been and still were essentially atheists, belonging to the same “civilization” represented by Marxist ideology. Religion was enhanced by their respective leaders as a tool to foster nationalism in each group.

The first Gulf War against Iraq seemed to have a religious undertone because it was mostly a NATO war against a Muslim State—which had violated the border with another Muslim State, Kuwait. The truth, however, in all of these cases, as in the war in Kosovo, is that religion was used as a pretext, covering other reasons. Apparently noble in some cases, as the alleged defense of international law and human rights, these reasons did not diminish other political, strategic and economic interests, less or more evident as the control of oil fields, underlying foreign intervention.

Nowadays, the conflicts we see are still more complex. Contrary to first impressions, they also are not wars of religion, in the regular sense of that concept. To a certain extent one can even argue if they are wars.

There are, of course, brutal attacks by ethnic and religious segments of populations, as well as between the armed forces of military coalitions and religious groups that consider themselves at war in the name of God. There are indeed inter-sectarian clashes ravaging specific countries; extreme antagonism by certain groups of believers against brothers in faith supposed to have gone astray; bombings on both sides against people and targets en-

visaged as symbols of Evil; military operations of atonement under the cover of preemption, stimulated by religious citations. Not to mention, of course, again, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, a clash of nationalisms and survival, tinged by religion.

Nevertheless, none of the current armed conflicts fits into the mold of a “clash of civilizations,” whether one takes the word “civilization” to mean “religion” or not. Above and underneath these manifestations of violence, the essential clash of our times is between fanatics of every creed.

FUNDAMENTALISM AND TERRORISM

It falls beyond the scope of this article to enter into the different schools of thought either in Islam or Christianity. Such a subject requires an expertise I do not have. However, it might be useful to point out some facts, sometimes disregarded, that leads to confusion when one addresses the main aspects of conflict in today’s world.

First, of course, there is the pervasive growth of what is called “fundamentalism” in every creed.

The word, in Western languages, comes from the Puritan understanding that believers must stick to “the foundations” of Christian faith: the Bible and its “fundamental teachings.” Starting with what is called “creationism,” as opposed to Darwinist evolutionism, Evangelic fundamentalism imposes literal acceptance of sacred texts, without trying to interpret them. Once the label

“fundamentalist” was extracted from the XIXth century Puritan reversal to the supposed foundations of Christianity, it was transferred by Western analysts to apparently similar positions in other religions. With this explanation in mind, it is not baseless to say, with adaptations, that, not only Protestants, but also Roman Catholics, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism have their own brands—in the plural—of “fundamentalism.” Of course no serious believer will accept such label, employed with negative connotation, since the very essence of faith requires observance of dogmas, traditions and, above all, sacred texts. The common label does not refer to long-established branches of Christianity, like the Orthodox Church—a name that speaks for itself—, or within Islam, like the Shiites as opposed to Sunni Muslims. Similarly to what happened with the early Lutherans—or early Protestants—and Catholics—or Papists—, their differences have been so well defined over the centuries as to form separated cults and hierarchies.

Contemporary meanings of so-called “fundamentalism,” while mostly applied to religions, metaphorically engulfs other fields. “Fundamentalists” have been multiplying everywhere, and “fundamentalism” has become the most widespread form of taking position in the world, even in the most material of all areas: the economy. Since the end of the Cold War, belief in so-called “neoliberal” precepts, based on the idea of the market as a benign ruler that distributes justice and wisdom for all,

was presented and imposed as the “universal consensus” from which there was no escape. In economics, inspiration came from XVIIIth century *laissez-faire* and trust in the “invisible hand” of the market, with less acceptance of State interference than Adam Smith’s. The result of such “fundamentalist” belief in free markets as the only acceptable standard has led not only to the present financial-economic crisis, from which we seem to be starting to recover with massive State interference, but also to various other sorts of societal confusion. Such confusion mixes the concept of liberty with unethical behavior, democracy with corruption, freedom with provocation and transgression, individualism with boundless greed.

There are other side-effects of that sort of “globalized economic fundamentalism” as a result of these distortions. One of them has come in the form of reinforced attachment to tradition as a reaction against the consumers’ values that neo-liberalism tends to foster. Together with traditions and ancient rules theoretically abolished by the modern, Weberian “disenchantment” of the world, religion re-emerges, by faith and by reason, in the political scene. Religious revival occurs not only in religious communities and countries, but also in constitutionally secular States. Even if only to ensure some higher form of control of the whole, often uncontrollable by civil and penal law and law-enforcement, secular leaders are also increasingly turning to religion and religious leaders in search of support for common aims.

Of course, fundamentalism is not “terrorism,” especially in the sphere of religion. Nor it necessarily means total refusal of different beliefs and behavior. However, for intransigent fundamentalists from East and West, difference may sometimes be tolerated only among the others, not among believers of the same community. Even though the first version of fundamentalism within Protestant denominations and the Islamic “salafyyah” (the path of “the good predecessors”) long predates the present scene, rejection of “rational” forms of belief constitute one of the cultural ingredients of our times. More attached to outer symbols of allegiance, like dress codes, mystical demonstrations of belief, public repentance, exorcism and other rites, than intimate devotion and theological explanations for science, today’s religious revival, of every faith, voluntarily chooses what Olivier Roy calls “holy ignorance.”²

The second confusing phenomenon of today is “contemporary terrorism,” a notion that now immediately recalls the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York in suicide-attacks. Brutal acts of terrorism they were, let there be no confusion about this. Even if they had been preceded by many other terrorist acts, by obsessed fanatics of the same and other persuasions, none had had the spectacular dimension of the deadly strikes of September 11, 2001 on the twin towers of Manhattan.

2 Olivier Roy, *La Sainte Ignorance — Le temps de la religion sans culture*,” Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2008.

Political analysts are still reluctant to use that label first applied to a phase in the French Revolution, in spite of numerous conventions that explicitly refer to “terrorism,” without an internationally approved definition.³

Use of terror was mentioned by that name and condemned, without reservations, at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, in Vienna. Its Declaration and Program of Action, adopted without a vote by all delegations, supposedly representing States of every religion and political systems, stated:

The acts, methods and practices of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations as well as linkage in some countries to drug trafficking are activities aimed at the destruction of human rights, fundamental freedoms and democracy, threatening territorial integrity, security of States and destabilizing legitimately constituted Governments. The international community should take the necessary steps to enhance cooperation to prevent and combat terrorism.⁴

Without delving into the meanings of the word “terrorism,” and fully aware that the “terrorist” for some is the “hero,” the “freedom fighter,” or the “martyr” for the others—or even for the same, in different circumstances—, what makes the contemporary form of terrorism so confusing are not the acts of diffuse violence in them-

3 Like the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism, of 1999, or the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism, of 2005, both adopted by the United Nations General Assembly.

4 The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, Part I, article 17.

selves. Terrorism, whichever definition and perpetrators, including State terrorism with or without armies, always aims at spreading fear and insecurity, violate human rights and fundamental freedoms, often harming and killing non-combatants. It was with this straightforward understanding that the Vienna Conference "universally" denied legitimacy to it, and proposed enhanced cooperation to fight it.

It is true that terror in the past was mostly understood as a *technique* used by anarchists or other insurgents against the State as an institution. With this exclusive background, there should be no surprise in the literal condemnation of terrorism by representatives of States.⁵ Today's manifestations of that technique, however, reach far beyond territorial, political or religious delimitation.

Although I obviously reject implication that terrorism might be intrinsically linked to Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism or any other transcendental system of beliefs, I will concentrate here on those aspects of present-day terrorism that give vent to the notion of a "clash of civilizations": bombing and hostage-taking of civilians performed by so-called "jihadists" and military actions led by Western forces. I beg the indulgence of

5 Even though the first attempt to incriminate terrorism, the "Geneva Convention" of 1937, drafted by the League of Nations, as "criminal acts aimed against a State," never entered into force for lack of ratifications, and since then no formal, juridical definition has been approved.

Muslims for sometimes employing the expression “jihadist,” since, even without speaking Arabic, I understand that the concept of “jihad” is much nobler in sacred texts. Moreover, I share Habermas’ perception that events like those of September 7—followed by the bombs detonated in London and Madrid subways⁶—, lacking any realistic objective, do not have political content. I therefore will not use the current neologism “Islamist,” meaning extremists who apparently wish to attain political control of the world to impose a planetary caliphate, nor the other expressions that tend to associate Islam to the attacks. On the other hand, I will also address aspects of the ongoing forms of combat to terrorism that practically amount to terror techniques.

What makes contemporary acts of terrorism so difficult grasp are neither vernacular resources, nor the acts of violence in themselves. More elusive than ever are the goals of inspirers of terrorist actions and the form of reaction some countries have decided to take against them.

TERRORIST GOALS

While the suicide-bomber makes the symbolic image of contemporary terrorism, the kind that, in the media

6 Of course, the first attempt against the World Trade Center, in 1993, as well as the explosion of a Bali discotheque, among other strikes, could be added to this list. Those in London and Madrid only more readily fit into the “expected” follow-up of September 11.

and in Western public opinion, seems to sum up the horror in which the world seems to live now, the phenomenon of voluntary ultimate self-sacrifice in itself is not entirely new. Even if one cannot compare suicide-attackers to the religious martyrs of any faith or heresy, who willfully submitted to agonizing forms of torture and death to assert their own beliefs, without harming anybody else, one can always recall the Japanese kamikaze at the end of the Second World War. Both the suicide-bomber and the kamikaze intend to carry enemy lives with theirs. Regardless of their individual intellectual level, wealth and motivation, which can be varied, it is difficult to believe these people would offer themselves so obstinately, in such absolute sacrifice, if there were no convincing mentors behind them. Mentors are, therefore, the real terrorists.

Of the several thousand real stories one can read on the subject of today's suicide-bombers, one that was published last August seems particularly eloquent. It involved a woman, one out sixteen female would-be suicides arrested in the Diyala Province of Iraq since the beginning of 2008, some of them caught with their vests with bombs already strapped on. Having been visited more than once by the interviewing journalist, the prisoner apparently developed some affection for her. However, when asked whether she would kill the journalist herself under specific directions from those who instructed her, after a brief hesitation, she answered, as quoted in the text: "If they in-

sisted, yes, I would, yes. As a foreigner it is ‘halal’ to kill you.”⁷ It is true the journalist was American, and the Iraqi woman had lost her five “mujadhedeem” brothers killed by American forces. Furthermore, no one questions the fact that Al Qaeda and other similar groups and networks consider themselves to be at war with the West, now aiming in particular US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, no less than Western States and local allies consider themselves at war with these groups and networks.

It is also well-known that some radical Islamic “fundamentalists” have, for a long time, theorized in favor of and practiced violence against fellow Muslims they envisage as traitors of Islam, therefore “unbelievers.” Historical evidence, some very close to us, tragically proves this assertion with abundant attempts and killings in many countries. The same happened within Christendom against heretics and “witches.” Extremists of many faiths, causes and ideologies have always perpetrated political attempts and mass killings against their own brethren. Motivated by religion or non-religious beliefs, the explosion of the Oklahoma City building, in 1994, the murder of Itzhak Rabin in Israel, in 1995, the attack with nerve gas in the Tokyo subway, also in 1995, are but three examples from innumerable cases outside the Islamic context. A similar logic underlies the acts of setting fire to abortion clinics, and many others.

7 Alissa Rubin, “Determined to die in a suicide blast,” *Intern. Herald Tribune*, August 15-16, 2009.

A few days after publication of the article on female bombers in Iraq, the same international newspaper reported that a suicide-attacker, this time a man, had exploded himself together with tribal guards of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, on the first day of Ramadan, killing a total of 22 people. According to a witness, the man had offered food to the police officers, who were preparing to break their religious fast, before dusk, and was welcomed to join the gathering on a lawn.⁸ Whether the suicide-bomber was trying to gauge religious devotion of the guards before the last ray of sun of the day, or, more probably, had been directed to kill them anyway in tribal strife is irrelevant. What matters here in this now almost routine event, despite its numerous deaths, is that the suicide-bomber, alone or under instructions from their leaders, was not committing an act against supposedly heretics or religious enemies. He and his mentors were either waging war against sin, or, otherwise, simply used a typical act of contemporary terrorism to perform tribal killings within the same cultural and political spheres. There was not even an implicit hint that the so-called "tribal guards" had done anything under influence from the West, that they worked for the Americans, or even that their tribe was allied to any party of the military alliance. Nor is there an indication that ethnic rivalries in Afghanistan are specifically based on religion.

8 Ismail Khan & Pir Zubair Shah, "At Least 22 Dead in Pakistan Bombing," *Intern. Herald Tribune*, August 28, 2009.

Whether present-day violent episodes should be understood as battles of interpretation and practice of a war within one religion, or if they are aspects of a war of religions involving, on one side, military forces of States and, on the other, religious extremists, quite often citizens of and coming from the State they combat, is debatable. According to declarations from leaders of Islamic movements that use suicide-bombers, they firmly believe they are engaged in a religious conflict, or extreme form of “jihad” against Evil and unbelievers, of planetary proportions. Converse positions appeared to be held by leaders of the military coalitions formed to combat those movements. However, they do not, alone, make a “clash of civilizations.” On the contrary, irrespective of understandings that they are in “fitna” or “jihad,” insurrection or resistance against occupation, preemptive wars, humanitarian intervention or military operations of revenge, today’s most violent clashes deny the notion spread by Huntington.

REACTION TO TERROR

Coming now to the form of reaction some States decided to adopt against terrorism, definitions and labels seem equally elusive. If one considers Biblical and Manichean statements with explicit religious connotation made by certain Western leaders, especially when still considering courses of action, the impression one could get was that these leaders, like Al Qaeda, were

convinced they were engaged in a clash of religions or competing civilizations. With the first announcement of a “crusade” against those who “gave sanctuary” to terrorists, military operations under names like “Infinite Justice,” and the like, such reaction seemed to belong in a transcendental realm. It seemed to echo its most searched person, the leader of a movement declared to be at war against “Jews” and “Crusaders.” It endorsed the opponent’s view that the attacks of September 11 had “split the entire world into two abodes: an abode of belief where there is no hypocrisy, and an abode of unbelief, may God protect us and you from it.”⁹ Although the worst wordings were soon withdrawn as *faux pas*, replaced by supposedly more appropriate terms, in spite of declarations that the American-led coalition was not at war with Islam, the continuous use of Biblical expressions, associated to other factors—like the abuse of the *Koran* as a tool for offending Islamic prisoners in interrogations—, strengthened the feeling that those military strategies, questionable from any standpoint, looked as if Huntington’s theoretical paradigm had become the guiding model for action.

Worse than any impression caused by words and symbols, those Western leaders seemed to have opted precisely for the kind of reaction wanted by the terrorists themselves.

9 Bin Laden’s first public statement after September 11, 2001, quoted in As’ad AbuKhalil, *op .cit.*, p. 84.

Living in the US on the occasion of the attacks of September 11, I remember the feeling of awe the attacks provoked. To a large extent I also shared the fear and general insecurity generated by them and amplified by the media, together with the government's issuance of frequent "orange and red alerts." I recall as well how easy it was to foster suspicion, intolerance and "patriotism" among the understandably frightened, offended population, against dissenting views. I never forgot how Susan Sontag was boycotted after her remarks against the interpretation that the attacks had been aimed at "civilization" and "the free world," but rather at the "world's self-proclaimed super power, undertaken as a consequence of American alliances and actions."¹⁰ Without underwriting such blunt words, incidentally also simplistic, but with certainly no involvement in the prevailing hyper-sensitive mood, one could easily understand that bombing an already poor, ravaged country would never be a good reaction. Let alone when the target was a Muslim country with fundamentalist inclinations. Military action was precisely the sort of reaction that masterminds of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon must have wished for. It was pretty evident that armed force by itself cannot dismantle a network of dispersed believers, who use the internet and resort to suicide operations. Almost nobody dared to say it openly. When

10 Remarks published by *The New Yorker*, September 24, 2001, in *The Talk of the Town*.

somebody did, it was not reproduced in American mainstream press.¹¹ Asked about the reasons why NATO was then hesitating to join forces with Washington in attacking the Taliban, maverick Noam Chomsky replied:

They recognize, as does everyone with close knowledge of the region, that a massive assault on a Muslim population would be the answer to the prayers of bin Laden and his associates, and would lead the U.S. and its allies into a “diabolical trap,” as the French foreign minister put it.¹²

In France, with a more philosophical perspective non-detached from reality, in November 2001, Jean Baudrillard, for whom terrorism was the extreme phenomenon arising from globalization, qualified military action as a particularly useless, false event. Inverting Clausewitz’s definition, Baudrillard explained his accurate point by describing war as “the continuation of absence of politics by other means.”¹³

While political declarations and military operations against terrorists seemed to warrant the notion of a clash of civilizations, if not exactly of a war of religions—one of the vital allies in the “Coalition of the Willing” was Muslim Pakistan—, other practices of counter-terror-

11 European newspapers, however, did, including the *London Times*. Quotations from different European analysts and politicians can be found *inter alia* in the interviews given via e-mails by Noam Chomsky in September/October 2001, reproduced in *Chomsky’s 9-11*, New York, Seven Stories Press, 2001.

12 Noam Chomsky, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

13 Jean Baudrillard, *L’esprit du terrorisme*, Paris, Galilée, 2002, p. 45-6 (originally published by *Le Monde*, November 3, 2001).

ism apparently represented a victory of those they purported to combat.

It is difficult to sum up briefly all the security measures adopted by Western States that seemed to send the message that “the West” had given up concepts that it proudly used to claim as “Western values.” First and foremost, there were gross violations of civil liberties, considered to be the first generation of universal human rights. Starting by arbitrary arrests, often based on racial and religious stereotypes, followed by extra-judicial detentions, refusal to abide by the Geneva conventions on humanitarian law and the employment of verbal euphemisms to evade legal definitions, these measures, most of them still in force, extended to more general practices of surveillance, wiretapping, video-recordings and the like, that amounted to abolition of the right to privacy of entire populations, with a focus on specific groups. At the end of this descent from higher values there comes the widely acknowledged issue of torture, associated or not with the practice of renditions. While most of this took place with cognizance by all, involving enactment of new legislation to legitimize brutalities, such practices were also denounced as gross violations of, at least, international human rights law. Never before, since the Second World War, would Giorgio Agambem’s view that the world lives now in a permanent state of exception seem so accurate.¹⁴

14 Giorgio Agambem, *Estado de Exceção*, transl. Iraci D. Poleti, São Paulo, Boitempo Editorial, 2004.

All of this leads to the question: if one has to abdicate from values that theoretically represent one's own moral identity in order to succeed in specific battles, who has, after all, won the war? If such a question must have been at the back of many minds for quite a long time, it acquires more ominous updating in the light of the new, unexpected surge of coordinated bombings in Afghanistan, immediately before the presidential elections of August 2009, together with threats and warnings against aimed at frightening the Afghan population away from the ballot box.

Apart from Afghanistan, the Taleban and Al Qaeda, of course there is still the occupation of Iraq. By now it is absurd to re-engage in discussions on the causes of the unilaterally decided military action by an *ad hoc* alliance. It is abundantly proven that the alleged reasons were wrong, the operation unwarranted, results still unsteady and long time effects, unpredictable. It also seems irrelevant to call it intervention, preemption, invasion or anything else. The fact of the matter now is that a new government is in place, elected by the Iraqis, recognized abroad, and this government itself favors withdrawal of foreign troops. Even if terrorists still unexpectedly shake the scenario, local political actors seem to be now legitimized. There is no denying, however, that this second military intervention in Iraq seemed to confirm the impression that a clash of civilizations was happening. The fact that terrorists and suicide-bombers, since 2003, had mostly concentrated their action in that country, led to

the interpretation that they were forces of resistance to foreign occupation. Even if some so-called extreme fundamentalist currents have long taught that it was “halal” to kill unbelievers, the way the above-referred woman arrested in Diyala saw herself, and recognized that she would be capable of killing the American interviewer, was that of a anti-foreigner resistant. However, one has to ask, is it really so? Aren’t the Iraqis themselves the main targets of most attacks? Are masterminds of suicide-bombers really mainstream Muslims from Iraq? Are they not, again, outcast self-proclaimed Islamic “jihadists” of different origins, rejected by Islam itself, gathered in Iraqi territory to fight the material sources of Evil and those befallen to its seduction? If the reply is positive in this case, it conforms to neither a clash of civilizations, nor a war of religions.

CULTURAL CO-EXISTENCE

Having set aside the idea that the contemporary world is prone to an unavoidable clash of civilizations, starting by wars of religions, it is possible to deal with today’s inescapable cultural co-existence with a less passionate, more rational approach. Intercultural co-existence is not an aim one can choose: it is a fact. It occurs, in different degrees, with different reception, basically everywhere. The most one can do is to decide on the best way to deal with it.

Before being a Brazilian official in charge of the governmental aspects of the United Nations’ Alliance of

Civilization, since 2002 I have participated in the work of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the 18 member treaty-body established to monitor implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, of 1965. There, at the Committee, by examining periodic reports of States Parties to the Convention, as well communications and complaints by individuals, groups, governmental and non-governmental organizations, I have been able to note how mixed every society has become by now. In the XXIst century, heterogeneity is the common feature in every country, to such an extent that CERD, integrated by experts elected by States Parties in a manner that is supposed to give consideration "to equitable geographical distribution and to the representation of the different forms of civilization as well as of the principal legal systems,"¹⁵ regularly rejects statements by any government that its respective population is homogenous. Or that there is no form of racial or ethnic discrimination in the State Party.

While States have increasingly become less homogenous, and the world increasingly intertwined, smaller communities and large religions have not. On the contrary, as a form of self-assertion of minorities in relation to the majority, or general self-protection against homogenization by the consumer culture of the market, inher-

15 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, article 8, Par. 1.

ent to current capitalist globalization, cultures seem to have become stronger, almost sacred. Since religion has always been one of the most important aspects of cultures, religious revival has been an aspect of contemporary times, while religion itself has become an essential factor in politics, not only in religious, but also in secular States.

There are, of course, different ways of dealing with the multi-cultural composition of contemporary societies, which very few governments and parties still insist on denying. In very broad terms, one can divide present attitudes towards plurality along two main lines: those who profess “multiculturalism,” and those who prefer “integration”—a term that should not be confused with “assimilation,” the complete crushing of cultural diversity for total absorption into the dominant mainstream, common in most States until the end of the Cold War.

Originally devised by Canada as a political approach to avoid the separation of French-speaking Quebec, “multiculturalism” is a way of dealing with differences of racial, ethnic, cultural and national origins now mostly associated with the Anglo-Saxon tradition. On the other side, linked to the French republican tradition, there stand policies of integration—not exactly “integrationism,” a term that reeks of outdated policies of “homogenous nation-States,” used in the past against ethnic minorities to deny their right to identity, or, as the expression now goes, their “right to be different,” or “right to difference.”

Both expressions "multiculturalism" and "cultural integration" are, as usual in political language, misleading. Both can be good or bad, according to the semantics attached to them. Multiculturalism, one of the main ideological tendencies of the times, is certainly good to the extent that it purports to recognize and respect existing differences, not to invent them. It can also be bad, with or without good intention, if it treats cultures as monoliths, refractory to syncretism and miscegenation, enhancing racialism and, together with it, discrimination and self-segregation as side-effects. Less fashionable than multiculturalism, and put under suspicion by essentialist minority rights movements, integration has always been a positive aim, provided it takes place with due regard to equality of conditions and respect for each one's identity. Whenever based on forceful disregard for distinctions, it becomes assimilation, a form of integration policy no longer accepted insofar as it generally violates universal human rights. On the other hand, many countries adopt policies of so-called "affirmative action" with special measures, including preferences and quotas, for specific groups without referring to them as "minorities," or declaring themselves "multiculturalist." Others consider they are "multiculturalist" simply meaning that they acknowledge the plural contributions that make the nation. Others still state they are homogeneous in terms of race or religion, but try to ensure the rights of different people in their territory, citizens or foreigners.

Seldom do we find a State that still adamantly refuses the right of the culturally different to use their own language, to profess their own religion, to practice their own cults, provided they do not violate domestic law. By this I do not mean, of course, that politicians, law enforcement agents, judges, officials, business and common people respect the human rights of the different all the time.

One of the aspects of today's tendencies, as already mentioned, is radicalization of extremes, not only in the religious sphere. Fascist-like intolerance, racism and xenophobia, aggravated by competition in global capitalism, and post-modern negation of universal values, are natural correlates. While this explosive mixture here refers to societies, it also applies to the international context. I do not add "terrorism" to the list of "natural correlates," because I morally refuse to attach the adjective "natural" to it. Even though, in pure logical terms, anyone might subscribe to Baudrillard's—and Derrida's, as well as many other analysts'—interpretation of contemporary terrorism as a virus engendered by the economic-technological system that has globalized its intrinsic inhumanity together with its own forms of terror.

THE ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

In 2004, in the aftermath of the subway station explosions which killed 192 people in Madrid, a new government was elected in Spain. While other governments

in many countries, including Spain, had joined the military reaction to September 11, as well as its expansion to Iraq under other motives, the new government withdrew the Spanish contingent from Iraq, keeping participation only in the U.N. mandated peace operation in Afghanistan. Furthermore, President of Government Jose L.R. Zapatero proposed at the U.N. General Assembly a peaceful "Alliance of Civilizations," and the establishment of a High Level Group, to be nominated by the Secretary General, "to push forward this initiative."¹⁶ The name sounded nice, opposing the "clash," but form and content had, by then, to be invented.

Heeding the suggestion of the President of Government of Spain, with co-sponsorship by Prime Minister Recep T. Erdogan, of Turkey, in July 2005, Secretary-General Kofi Annan launched the "Alliance of Civilization, aimed at bridging divides between societies exploited by extremists."¹⁷ He also announced the decision to convene a group of eminent persons, to discuss concrete substance for the initiative and present a report with recommendations and a plan of action. The High-Level Group, integrated by twenty intellectuals from all geographical areas, held several debates and presented

16 Statement by the President of the Government of Spain, Jose Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, at the Fifty-Ninth Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, September 24, 2004 (unofficial translation – Misión Permanente de España en las Naciones Unidas)

17 Press Release SG/SM/10004, 14 July, 2005.

its report in November 2006. Since then, that report has been, the source of reference for all plans and projects set in motion within the Alliance of Civilizations.¹⁸

The report is direct and down to earth. It states *inter alia*: “(T)he anxiety and confusion caused by the ‘clash of civilizations’ theory regrettably has distorted the terms of the discourse on the real nature of the predicament the world is facing.”¹⁹ On the item “Emergence of Extremism,” it says: “The exploitation of religion by ideologues (...) has led to the misguided perception that religion itself is a root cause of intercultural conflict.” The term “fundamentalism” is viewed as “coined by Protestant Christians (...) not readily applicable to other communities.” What is deemed important to note on this issue is that so-called fundamentalist movements, not necessarily violent, “exist across most faith traditions (...). What is common to them is a deep disappointment and fear of secular modernity, which many of them have experienced as invasive, amoral, and devoid of deeper meaning.” Extremism, “not, by nature, religious,” is described as the advocacy of “radical measures in pursuit of political goals.”²⁰

With a membership—called Group of Friends—of 101 States and international organizations in September

18 Also distributed as a booklet published by the United Nations, the report as well as information on everything related to the Alliance of Civilizations can be read at www.unaoc.org and links.

19 Report of the High-level Group, par. 1.3.

20 *Ibid.*, par. 3.8 and 3.10.

2009, this alliance includes a large array of private and other partners, and has no military implication. Based on the understanding that, to overcome “polarized perceptions, fueled by injustice and inequality,” made worse by “wars, occupation and acts of terror” that have exacerbated “mutual suspicion and fear within and among societies,” it is necessary “to forge the collective political will to address the world’s imbalances,”²¹ the Alliance of Civilizations concentrates action in four priorities: education, youth, migration and the media. While States and intergovernmental organizations are the members, most projects, which are supposed to have a multiplying effect, are devised, funded and implemented by civil society, including, of course, educational institutions.

Having experienced terror from other sources in the country, the Socialists of Spain had long opted for negotiation as a better means than sheer repression to placate the fury of ETA extremists. Dialogue did not quench terror, but, while searching for its eradication, it certainly did not stimulate resentment facilitating mobilization of agents. A similar attitude inspires the Alliance of Civilizations. No one expects that the initiative in itself will eradicate the causes of contemporary terrorism. Nor the belief that cultures tend to clash. It can, at most, help creating conditions for a better mutual understanding. While trying to counteract disseminated stereotypes, it certainly does not feed

21 *Ibid.*, par. 1.4.

conditions that arouse what Amin Maalouf calls “murderous identities.”²²

Multiculturalism is a kind of social policy that seems to be in vogue. Reality, however, is multicultural, not multiculturalist, let alone integrationist in the positive sense of the word. Nevertheless, whether one likes it or not, the interlinked world will continue to put cultures still closer, side by side and intermingled. It is necessary to do everything possible to counter the present situation in which natural responses to alterity are Fascist-like intolerance, racism, xenophobia and other brands of extremism.

If, despite current political backlashes, majorities in most societies have started to understand that diversity is good, and so many States are declaring to accept cultural pluralism as wealth, not handicaps, the world can also, one day, follow on. Maybe this is only *naïve* wishful thinking; maybe not. Little more than one year ago a black President in the United States was something unconceivable. About two years ago no one would read from the pen of an admiral who chairs the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff: “Each time we fail to live up to our values (...) we look more and more like the arrogant Americans the enemy says we are. (...) The Muslim community is a subtle world we don’t fully—and don’t always

22 Amin Maalouf, *Les identités meurtrières*, Paris, Grasset, 1998.

attempt to—understand.”²³ Surprisingly enough, for already more than seven years, the Brazilian President of the Republic, elected and re-elected by popular vote, is a metallurgical worker, very admired worldwide. For twenty years the Cold War has been over. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, along more than four decades, no one dared to predict that this could happen in any foreseeable lifetime.

23 Quotation from Admiral Mike Mullen in article published by the Joint Force Quarterly, as reproduced by Thom Shanker, “U.S. Message to Muslims is Flawed, Admiral Says”, *International Herald Tribune*, August 28, 2009.