

Can universalism survive?

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Recently there has been a lot of talk about “universalism,” “internationalism” and “globalisation,” which have been compared and contrasted with concepts such as “isolationism,” “exclusivism” and “nationalism”. Internationalists have been at loggerheads with nationalists, insults have been exchanged between those with outward-looking, “inclusive” attitudes and those who are inward-looking and exclusive, and there have been clashes between “original, native inhabitants” and “incomers” or “intruders”. One group describes itself as modern, up-to-date and forward-looking, and its opponents as chauvinists, reactionaries, racists and narrow-minded narcissists, while the other side sees itself as loyal to its origins and heritage and the other side as corrupted by foreign influences.

This article aims to examine whether or not “universalism” has the ability to survive. We shall consider this ques-

tion in the light of two mutually contradictory trends that have emerged in recent years—one towards universalism and the other towards isolationism or “exclusivism.” Today people are confused and perplexed by this issue and have no idea which way to turn—sometimes taking a step in one direction only to go back on their tracks and proceed in the opposite direction.

124 In dealing with this question our focus will be on the prospects for universalism’s long-term survival. While the concept itself has more connotations with the future than it does with the past, particularly when the word “universalism” is linked to “survival,” at the same time we cannot ignore the past. This is not because we are “creatures formed by our heritage” in the sense described by Taha Hussain when he said: “[It is as if] their heads were mounted [on their bodies] facing backwards: they look to yesterday while their opponents look to tomorrow.” Rather, it is because — in the universalist context — looking back to our heritage is one of our natural attributes as human beings. We may do this in either a positive or a negative way; if we are positive we may engage in a critical dialogue, while if our approach is negative (and wrong), we may opt for blind, unthinking adherence to the ideas, traditions and practices of the past.

In the light of the above, it might be appropriate for us to ask: What is modern Western thought but a type of “European universalism” that takes the form of a “future-oriented” critical dialogue with tradition?

A glance at the experiences of different nations will show us that they do not share a single common universalism in the absolute sense. Universalism always contains other elements as well. “Pure universalism” is a dream—a figment of the imagination—and is no more realistic than the Utopian ideal of a universal artificial language as conceived by philosophers from Leibnitz to Wittgenstein and including such languages as Volapuk, Esperanto and Ido. So many artificial languages have been stillborn, yet all of them have been proposed as feasible alternatives to natural languages. Consequently, philosophers have found themselves forced to recognise the fact that we are incapable of creating a language that is better than the languages we already use in our daily lives. The Austrian philosopher Wittgenstein—originally a “universalist idealist,” a man who had dreamt of a universal language that would solve all linguistic problems and resolve all clashes between individual exclusive groups—eventually came to adopt the “Ordinary Language” philosophy and recognised that the concept of a viable artificial language was an illusion.

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The concept of “universalism” also lost credibility as an idea that can unite all nations on a basis of equality and common identity. This is because “universalism” has always been a multi-coloured spectrum, not a single colour. Even so, there is no reason why the different colours of this spectrum should not be mutually compatible and come together in a single strand. There are numerous instances in which mankind as a whole has access to what is actually

the product of a specific culture, after which it takes on the colours of its adopted cultures.

A glance at the past history of “universalism” may help us to determine the course it will follow in future.

Whatever criticisms may be made of it as a model, ancient Rome offers one of the oldest and best known examples of universalism in human history. The German historian-philosopher and thinker Herder—champion of the concept of national identity and founder of the “cultural relativism” school—noted that it allowed the different religions within its realm to coexist in relative peace and harmony. It also propagated “international law” among the different nations; indeed, how could this not be the case, when Roman civilization was a “global law civilization” par excellence?—The “universalist aspects” of the Roman model proved their long-term sustainability in the ancient world and they were only replaced when another “universalism” arose, this time in the name of religion (that is to say, the universalism of Christianity) rather than law, as was the case with its predecessors.

It was hardly surprising, therefore, that Augustine—a young Berber from Algeria later known as Saint Augustine—should travel to Rome in search of that “Roman-Christian coloured universalism” and eventually become one of the greatest fathers of the Church. In religion originally a pagan Manichean and philosophically a Platonist, he became one of the leading theologians of the Christian faith.

In Mediaeval times “universalism” became a partly Islamic phenomenon. There are two witnesses to this—one from “our people” and one from the “people of the West.”

In the first case, *‘ilm al kalam*, or theology, became an element of Islamic culture which may be described as having a “universalist tendency.” The Muslims were not afraid of its “universalism” apart from—possibly—the hard-line “exclusivists.”

One scholar—Mohammed bin al Faraj bin Abdullah al Waliy al Ansari—reports the following conversation:

I heard Abu Mohammed bin Abi Zaid ask a question of Abu ‘Umar Ahmed bin Mohammed bin Sa’adi al Maliki, when he arrived in Qairouan from the Lands of the East – Abu ‘Umar had gone to Baghdad while Abu Bakr Mohammed bin Abdullah bin Saleh al Anhari was still alive. One day he [i.e. Abu Mohammed] said to him: “Did you attend the gatherings of the *Ahl al Kalam* (theologians)?” He [i.e. Abu ‘Umar] replied: “Yes. I attended them twice. Then I left their gatherings and did not return to them.” Abu Mohammed said to him: “Why?” He replied: “When I attended the first gathering I saw that it was a gathering in which all the groups had come together: Muslims of the people of the Sunnah and people of *bid’ah* (heretical innovation), as well as Unbelievers including Magians, atheists, free-thinkers, Jews and Christians and all other types of Unbelievers. Each group had its own leader who spoke for his sect and debated on its behalf. Whenever the head of any group entered, everybody stood up and remained standing until he had sat down. Then they too would sit down. When the gathering was full and they saw that they were not waiting for anyone else to join them, one of the Unbelievers said: ‘You are gathered together for the debate. We do not accept the arguments the Muslims produce from their Book, nor the words or their Prophet, and we shall debate using intellectual arguments, not opinion and analogy.’ Then the others said: ‘Yes. You may do that.’” Then Abu ‘Umar said: “After I heard that I did not return to that gathering. Then I heard there was another theologians’ gathering, so I went

to it and found they were the same as the first lot, so I stopped going to the theologians' gatherings." Abu Mohammed bin Abi Zaid said: "And did the Muslims acquiesce in such words and behaviour?" Abu 'Umar replied: "That is what I observed from them." Abu Mohammed was amazed by what he had heard and said: "The *'ulama* (scholars) have gone and are no more and Islam's sanctity and rights are no more. How can Muslims accept a debate between Muslims and Unbelievers? That is not even permissible in the case of the people of *bida'*, who are Muslims and endorse Islam and Mohammed (peace be upon him)."

Secondly, in the late 1100s CE the Briton Daniel of Morley travelled through southern Europe in search of wisdom. In his memoirs he states:

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I stopped for a time in Paris, and there I saw a number of professors who were filled with pride and arrogance (...) whose followers treated them almost like gods. (...) I never desired to fall victim to the kind of petrification that had afflicted them. Therefore, as soon as I heard that the creed of the Arabs was widespread in Toledo, I hastened there in order that I might listen to the wisest philosophers in the world.

This is an example of a movement in the opposite direction to the first one we have mentioned—a seeker after wisdom who fled a Europe immersed in isolation and “exclusivity” in favour of the radiant universalism of Islam.

In the Age of Enlightenment the civilization of France came to represent “universalism par excellence”. The political, cultured and merchant classes only spoke French and Friedrich II of Prussia observed:

The best of the French writers have made their language a universal language, and French has become the language of scholars and politicians (...). If you travel from Lisbon to St. Petersburg or from Stockholm to Naples and you speak French, then it is certain that wherever you stop off en route people will understand you.

People only ate French food and they only conducted themselves in accordance with French etiquette. Hence the French art historian Louis Leau wrote a book which he entitled *French Europe in the Age of Enlightenment*.¹ (The same situation had existed in Italy during the Renaissance — when it enjoyed renown as Quattrocento Italy and represented the universalism of “the whole of humanity.”)

Leau chose the title of his book to reflect Europe’s “French-tinted universalism” during the eighteenth century — a theme taken up by the Italian diplomat Le Marquis Carracioli, who wrote a book in 1777 entitled *Paris: Model of foreign nations, or French Europe*, in which he made the following comment: “There can be no doubt that a dominant nation is always recognised as such and every- 129 one tries to imitate it. In the old days everything was Roman, while today it is all French.”²

The standard model for “universalism” has always been Rome, to the extent that not a single scholar has studied “French universalism” without trying to compare it with the Roman version. Among others, the French thinker and writer Rivarol—author of *Discourse on the universality of the French language*—wrote: “It seems that the time has come for us to speak of the ‘French World,’ just as we used to speak about the ‘Roman World’ in earlier times.”

1 Louis Leau, *L'Europe Francaise*, coll. L'évolution de l'humanité, Paris, Albin Michel, 1938 et 1971.

2 Le Marquis Carracioli, *Paris: le Modele des nations Etrangers, ou l'Europe Francaise*, in Louis Leau, *L'Europe Francaise*, op. cit., p. 9.

Even so, it is a well-known fact that wherever “universalism”—which must of necessity come in a particular colour—is dominant, there will always be those who resist it. Did not the great German thinker Thomasius write in his highly significant discourse on the subject—*Discourse on the imitation of the French*:

If our forefathers were to return to this earth, they would not recognise us. We have become a decadent, ignoble breed. Today everything we have and do must be French; we are French in our clothes, our food and our language; our habits and customs are French, and even our vices are French?³

And did not some English people also condemn what they referred to as “French fashions”? In 1738 a correspondent in the London Magazine wrote:

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Stupid imitation of France has become the plague of this kingdom. Poor England cannot produce anything that can be eaten, worn or drunk. Our clothes, our furniture, even our food—all those things have started coming to us from France. I do not wish to deny that France has a great civilization, but the only thing we copy from France – like monkeys—are the bad things. We imitate in a foul and rotten way that even the French themselves despise.⁴

At the same time, there is a truth about universalism that will not just disappear if it is ignored. Alongside the drive towards greater globalisation in today’s world, there is also a counter-movement in which some people are becoming increasingly protective of what they regard as their own specific cultural identity and values; some have even

3 Christian Thomasius, *Discours sur l’imitation des Francais*, in Louis Leau, *L’Europe Francaise*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

4 In Louis Leau, *L’Europe Francaise*, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

gone so far as to adopt it as a cultural and political demand. What is undeniable, however, is that today it is impossible for a person to shut his doors and close himself off from the winds that are blowing from the world outside. Nor can he ignore the fact that there are cultures produced by a wide range of different values and value systems and that numerous people have adopted them and come to regard them as their own. This does not just apply to the cultures of the developing world; it can also be seen in advanced countries too. Is there not a heated debate today between the neo-liberal supporters of multiculturalism and those who believe in a single standard set of values and cultural exclusivity within the borders of a single country?

However, as we have noted above, nations' experiences of universalism indicate that wherever there is "universalism" there will also be those who resist it. The two phenomena are inseparable and are mirror images of each other. 131

Every era has had an age that has been regarded as "applicable to all mankind"—i.e. universalism. Never neutral in colour, this universalism has always come in the colour of the dominant culture. Today, however, we find ourselves confronted by two conflicting claims: one raises doubts about universalism's survivability while the other sees the future of individual local identity as being in jeopardy. In my view, the different positions are the result of the growing role of the media. In earlier times getting hold of information was a slow and difficult process, but today all the doors to it are wide open and most cultures are open to the outside world. The only barrier today is capital, which is

the means by which assets are transferred from one place to another depending on the supremacy or controlling power of the highest bidder.

Who knows, perhaps after our era of Euro-American universalism the next universalism will be Chinese?

In his book *On searching for the truth* (1678), the famous French philosopher Nicolas de Malebranche wrote:

I can see that two times two equals four, and that a person should prefer his human friend to his dog. I am also completely certain that there is nobody on earth who is incapable of seeing this just as I see it (...). [However,] if the intellect that I consult in order to establish this is not the same as the one that responds to the Chinese when they consult theirs, then it is obvious that I cannot be certain—in the way that I am certain of it now—that the Chinese see the same truths that I see. (*On searching for the truth*, Explication Ten.)

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Nearly three and a half centuries after this idea was mooted, the contemporary French philosopher and Sinologist Francois Jullien pondered over Malebranche's assertion in a book devoted to the question of universalism—*On universalism, uniformity and commonality, and on intercultural dialogue* (1988).⁵ The issue has become more complex in our time, which is known as the Age of Globalisation, and we are unable to respond to it with Malebranche's degree of simplicity. (I.e. do such things as universal truths and values exist?) And, depending on the answer we give to this question, how is it possible to conceive of a dialogue between the different cultures?

5 Francois Jullien, *De l'universel, de l'uniforme, du commun and du dialogue entre les cultures*, Edition Fayard, 2008.

We need to make a serious and precise examination of what Jullien calls “simple universalism” (on the universalist side) and what he calls “relative inertia” (on the exclusivist side). How is it possible for us to think about the characteristics mankind has in common while taking into consideration the fact that there is a multiplicity of different cultures—that same multiplicity that is today threatened by “global standardisation”?

In highlighting the context and history of universalism, Westerners have tended to maintain that the concept of universalism is solely their invention. They see its context as being neither more nor less than the Western intellectual tradition—a tradition which, in their view, sees universalism as a pressing need. However, François Jullien proposes a third historical model. In his view, three factors caused the concept of universalism to occupy the place it occupies in Western thought today:

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1. The “concept” was first invented in Greek philosophical thought; then the Greek concept became globalised. It vexed Ibn Qutaiba—the Arab “exclusivist thinker” who rejected “globalised *shu’ubiyyah* (Islamic-style multiculturalism)” and complained in his book *Adab al Katib* (The Writer’s Etiquette) about the prevalence of Greek terms in Arab thinking, which had led to the development of theology.
2. The Romans’ invention of the concept of “citizenship,” which made no distinction between subjects of the Empire on the basis of race or creed. Hence the “universality of rights” established by the Romans.

3. Religion, as represented by St. Paul, which transcended all national affiliations and incorporated globalism in its belief system

Jullien also wonders whether the preoccupation with universalism is also a “universalist element” in itself. His answer to this question is: Yes and no. In the Arab, Indian, Japanese and Chinese cultures that he has examined he finds that—universalism is a significant factor. For example, in Arab culture he sees one manifestation of universalism as being the importance attached to logic, and in his view logic can only be described as a universalist phenomenon. In this he cites Matta’s defeat of al Sirafi during a night of debate in Abu Hayyan al Tawhidi’s *Al Im-taa’ wa’l Mu’aanasah* on the subject of whether logic is a universal discipline which is applied in all cultures or a “local discipline” which only applies in some cultures but not in others.

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Jullien maintains that even if these cultures did not actively consider the question of universalism, at the very least they “participated” in it. He can be forgiven for thinking this, since he has not read some of the writings in defence of—classical Arab Islamic cultural universalism. He makes an unflattering comparison between “Islamic ethics” and the Greeks’ abstract universalist position and asserts—accusingly—that in bringing the Believers together in one community the Islamic *Ummah* (nation) discriminates between them and the rest of the creation and thus falls short of the desired goal of universalism.

In making these accusations, our friend fails to take note of the fact that there were unbiased thinkers who adopted a universalist approach to human nations, communities and cultures. For example, in *Al Imtaa' wa'l Mu'aanasah* al Tawhidi quotes the vizier Ibn Sam'aan (who has just expounded the positive and negative features of different civilizations and cultures) as saying that every nation has its virtues and vices and all peoples and social and religious groups have their good points and bad points. "This," he says, "means that good and bad are found throughout humankind."⁶ Al Tawhidi also quotes his Sheikh—the logician Abu Sulaiman al Sijistani—as taking a balanced approach to universalism, when he describes nations and communities as sharing all good and bad points in common.⁷

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This fair-minded view of the common characteristics shared by different nations is "something found in anybody who is not influenced by personal whims and bigotry, who approaches his opponent in a spirit of justice, follows the path of truth and right in administering government affairs and is not a slave to custom (...) and tradition." He also observes that "all nations share a common intellect, even if they speak different languages."⁸ He also states that "in

6 Aby Hayyan al Tawhidi, *Al Imtaa' wa'l Mu'aanasah*, edited by Ahmed Amin and Ahmed al Zain, al Maktabah al 'Asriyyah, Beirut, Sidon, Part 1, p. 74.

7 *Ibid.*, Part 1, p. 211.

8 Abu Hayyan al Tawhidi: *Al Basaa'ir wa'l Dhakhaa'ir*, edited by Widad al Qadhi, dar Sader, Beirut, 1st impression, undated, Part 1, p. 228.

general, wisdom is something shared by [the whole of] humanity; it is not restricted to a particular generation or tribe (...).”⁹ “Cross-pollination” is an innate feature of the intellect, “mutual responsiveness” is common to [all] languages and every generation and nation has its own received wisdoms and truths.

But what is this “common characteristic” that perpetuates the principle of universalism among nations?

136 The great French artist Georges Braque said: “Seeking common ground does not mean looking for what is identical. Sustainable universalism is not standardised, uniform universalism, but a discrete, differentiated universalism.” A “common sense of humanity” among peoples—whatever their differences in colour or creed—is a rich source that never runs dry. The Roman humanist poet Terence said: “I am a human being. I consider nothing that is human alien to me.”

This is the true meaning of the constant to-ing and fro-ing between exclusivism and universalism. As Goethe said: “A person who only knows his own language does not truly know his own language.”

This sense of a common humanity is dependent upon constant and unlimited possibilities for interaction and mutual understanding and it is on this basis that universalism can survive and continue to thrive. When people are prepared to accept and understand different cultures—however different they may be from their own—chauvinism

9 *Ibid.*, Part 2, p. 163.

will melt away and die. By their very nature, things that belong to another age, culture or set of traditions will always be mutually intelligible. However, being able to accept this mutual understanding is not a “given” that is handed to us on a plate; rather, it requires constant effort and commitment.—The potential to accept universalism, which is present in all cultures and enables them to understand each other “from the inside,” enables individual cultures to take an objective look at themselves. Every exclusivist culture needs to look at itself in the mirror and, when it does so, it will have no right to point its finger accusingly at the mirror if the mirror shows it something that makes it feel uneasy.

This brings us to the importance of translation as a factor in enabling universalism to survive. Without it, we shall all find ourselves talking gibberish. In addition to this,—universalism’s sustainability is not achieved so much through comparing the “us” with the “other”—or looking for areas in which cultures are identical—as it is through a process whereby all those involved in the cultural sphere seek to discover the distinctive, distinguishing, rich and fertile qualities of their own cultures.

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Differences between cultures are never absolute because there is no culture upon earth that can remain static for all time. On the contrary, they “strive” to improve and strengthen themselves—just as our forefathers did when they Arabised the cultures of other peoples and pollinated them as part of their “striving, upon earth,” which is a great Qur’anic concept. Moreover, in principle there is

no impediment to prevent one culture from understanding another.

Hence the survival of universalism is conditional upon the extent of our openness to others and the extent of their openness to us.