

CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS OR INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE?

by Felix Marti

Felix Marti is director of the Centre UNESCO de Catalunya in Barcelona.

Harvard University professor Samuel P. Huntington has written that, in the future, the "clash of civilizations" will cause the world's main conflicts (*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel P. Huntington. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). Huntington defines "civilization" as the broadest grouping of people beyond the level distinguishing humans from other species. A civilization is defined by common objective elements -- language, history, religion, customs, institutions -- as well as by people's self-identification. Huntington tells us that there are currently seven or eight chief civilizations: Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Orthodox Slav, Latin American, and "possibly" African.

Huntington's theory challenges the post-cold war "end of history" scenario of an international order based on universal acceptance of the capitalist economic model, with no change on the horizon. The importance this North American professor attaches to cultural factors can be considered a highly positive development; until now, inter-state relations and conflicts have routinely been explained according to economic analysis. Political institutions grow out of economic power structures, and culture is economics, in the sense that in the West, the market system establishes the general framework of values which should in theory be independently generated by culture.

We Europeans like the importance of cultures to be recognized, because European identities are shaped by our cultural memory and awareness. Yet precisely because of our cultural experience, we cannot agree with all of Huntington's simplifications. For example, reducing the number of cultural areas to eight does not seem serious. The mention of a "possible" African civilization is laughable. Africa is a rich mosaic of cultures; so is Europe. And Europe is not the same as North America. What he lumps together as "Western civilization" has considerable internal fractures that cannot be attributed exclusively to migratory factors.

Civilizations are not monolithic blocs. Some, for example the Islamic civilization, are defined primarily by their religious inspiration; in others, such as the Confucian, the relationship between the religion inspiring them and the political force they exert is less clear. In Western civilization, Catholic or Protestant versions of Christianity form part of the cultural landscape, though citizens of Western states are deeply divided with regard to religious beliefs. In each of Huntington's civilizations there are trends of thought that follow confessional lines, and others that follow lay lines -- a subject of lively debate today in countries such as Turkey and Italy.

Besides religion, cultural splits make it difficult to look at civilizations as politically compact blocs. Huntington talks of Latin American culture, but ignores, for example, the division between the Spanish and Indian cultures. There are also considerable splits between social groups that benefit from the international economic system and those it discriminates against. On the African continent, oligarchies share Western values and cultural preferences while other groups make do with socially devalued

lifestyles far removed from modernity. Who represents African civilization -- the English- or French-speaking communities, or the masses who speak only local languages and lack access to Western technologies? A journey to the heart of each civilization will familiarize us with the prodigious wealth of human diversity, making it impossible to reduce all cultures to a single prototype with seven or eight different models.

The basic problem with Huntington's theory, however, is the conviction that all cultures aspire to imperial power. His own culture is fascinated with power -- American culture has spread spectacularly all over the world -- but what if others are not? What if they simply aspire to respect and coexistence? Fortunately, Huntington speaks of the impending end of the Western cultural monopoly. But it is far from clear whether the idea of ranking cultures according to Western criteria is also at an end. If cultures are seen as "superior" and "inferior," conflictual relations are inevitable. A large part of today's intercultural conflicts are a result of cultural humiliation. The Indians of Chiapas, for example, do not mobilize against the Western culture that characterizes Mexican political thinking, but against a long process of marginalization. Much of what is happening in the Islamic world, simplistically described as fundamentalism, is an assertion of cultural identities that have been treated as inferior.

In any case, Huntington perceives accurately that large cultural units, not states, are becoming the new actors of international politics. The irrationality of the map of states is evident at a glance: Andorra and China have the same rights, and neither the Saharans nor the Kurds exist. The political unit called France was built without regard for her cultural and linguistic communities; Africa is a conglomerate of some fifty states whose borders shamelessly disregard ethnic groups and traditions. In recent decades, viable political units both larger and smaller than states have emerged. Examples are the European Union on one hand, and the new distribution of power in Spain on the other, which grants limited sovereignty to "historical nationalities" and administrative decentralization to autonomous regions within its national boundaries. Similar situations can be found on other continents.

If the map of states is outdated, how do we go about finding an alternative? The great challenge of the twenty-first century is the democratic organization of cultural and community diversity. Human communities are awakening politically and aspiring to a political order founded on the recognition of the rights of all cultures and communities. Why do we still think in terms of seven or eight groups defending partial interests? It would be far better to establish the mental framework for a world organization serving the interests of the human species as a whole. Yet Huntington ignores the possibility of creating a global body of this sort by consensus; he thinks we are condemned to suffer the introverted, selfish nature of our various civilizations.

But what if the old conviction of the inevitable nature of violent conflict could be replaced with the conviction that wars have no future? If humanity has successfully outlawed slavery, once deemed normal and inevitable, why can we not imagine that war will be ruled out as primitive and excessively costly? Conventional thinking assumes that, as frequently happens in nature, the strong will oppress the weak, and feelings of compassion or love are not viable. But human beings have the intellectual and vital ability to subvert the natural order. They can, in freedom, opt for relations that respect the weak. They can renounce the use of force as a priority resource.

Rather than being seen as a cause for conflictual relations, differences between cultures can be sources of experiences of complementarity. Different cultures possess intellectual, symbolic and existential

instruments that provide a specific view of personal, historical and cosmic reality, but it need not be an impermeable view. Of course, mutual enrichment is possible only if the different parties recognize their limited nature. Dialogue does not mean betrayal; it means recognizing other points of view and other experiences in their honesty and coherence. It also implies the integration of valuable elements from other traditions, without fear of a loss of identity. In the search for a more plausible human future, Westerners can learn from other cultures a feeling for community, which could offset Western individualism, or ecological practices in harmony with nature, which could offset the Western philosophy of domination.

One guarantee of peace between cultures and civilizations is peace between religions. All the great universal religions call for peace, love, harmony, compassion, justice, mercy, charity, tenderness. Religions must not only teach nonviolence within their own communities, but practice a sincere fraternal dialogue with other religions, and defend religious freedom -- legislation respecting the freedom of conscience of every human being, and allowing the practice of any religion in the historical territory of the other religions. And religions should be able to agree on a set of universal ethical criteria to provide a basis for peace in the world, opening the door to wide-ranging intercultural and political agreements based on nonviolence.

The recognition of cultural pluralism requires the development of an advanced democracy. Democracy is not just citizen participation in the administration of rigid structures; the most interesting kind allows for transformations in these structures according to the aspirations of all groups. Democracy is also a method for dialogue and consensus between groups with different interests. Although Huntington and other analysts believe that differences inevitably lead human communities to violence and war, there are forms of agreement that respect the identity and freedom of all cultural groups. In theory, the freedom of each group seems no more utopian than the freedom of each individual member of a human community if we accept the rules of democracy. There cannot be advanced democracy without the freedom of all groups.

Cultural pluralism requires new international structures that will allow the entire human community to function as a democratic whole, based on a consensus on fundamental values. One reason war can emerge anywhere in the world is that there is no international court to listen to the demands of the Indian peoples of Latin America, the Chechens, the Kurds, the Berbers, the Corsicans, the Basques, the Tamils, the Tibetans or the peoples of Southern Sudan. The way of peace calls for the development of international arbitration bodies through which fairer recommendations and structures can be established. Public opinion, nongovernmental organizations, and the media can exert powerful pressure for a spirit of tolerance, a culture of consensus and an appreciation of institutions of moral arbitration. If we manage to advance democracy on an international level, the possibilities for peace will increase.

The struggle for peace is won day by day in a multitude of local situations. The cultural diversity that so worries Huntington is a fact of life in many schools, neighborhoods and workplaces, and in all of them it can be considered either a problem or something to be enjoyed. For all of us, the minor victories of dialogue, respect, and love for "others" are the seeds of a new multicultural democracy. They are modest yet profound landmarks on the road to universal peace.