

The Alternative

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Dear Reader:

In 1996, Samuel Huntington published a book entitled, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order. Reviews of the book were generally critical. The work was an extraordinarily ambitious one that attempted to explain all of the world's conflicts through one encompassing theory. Huntington posited nine civilizations (Western, Latin American, African, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Orthodox Christian, Buddhist, Japanese). Instead of nations at war, the fault lines are between civilizations that are sometimes within one nation (for example, Ukraine). I suspect that what put off reviewers in the United States was the emphatic role that Huntington gave to religion, a topic that academics try to avoid.

After September 11, 2001, Huntington's book took on a new life. His thesis that a (Christian) West must inevitably be in conflict with a Muslim civilization now seemed to many people prophetic. Politicians and academics have stepped gingerly around the subject of religion since last September. The official line in the United States is that church and state are separate. What impresses the Muslim world, however, are the liturgical hymns (God Bless America, America the Beautiful) and the presidential sorting out of good and evil. Since September, the tolerance shown to U.S. Muslims has been generally good. But the country is a long way from engaging in a serious discussion of Islam. Jack Miles's essay in this issue extends Huntington's thesis and asks for real dialogue with Islam.

The most interesting book this year that approaches the religious issue is Michael Ignatief's Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry. Ignatief is able to cast a critical eye on the language of human rights, recognizing the affirmation of rights as a kind of idolatry. He tries to be open to the good as well as the bad in religion. However, what he sees religion to be mainly about is the proposition that humans are sinners. The dispute comes down to this: the religious side believes that only if human beings get down on their knees can they save themselves from their own destructiveness; a humanist believes that they will do so only if they stand up on their own two feet. (p. 85).

His contrast of images is striking but it assumes too sharp an opposition of

religion and reason. That opposition does not allow for the redemptive power of religion. More important, it obscures the religious impulse of modern reason. In acknowledging the criticisms by religionists, Ignatief says "that the abominations of the twentieth century were an expression of secular hubris, of human power intoxicated by the technology at its disposal and unrestrained by any sense of ethical limit." (p. 86). But Hitler, Stalin and their successors could not have moved millions with "secular hubris." It required religious or quasi-religious pageantry and religious passion in the service of living and dying. Ignatief introduces the concept of idolatry to advocate restraints on the part of religion and secular humanism. But I doubt that one can consistently use that concept unless one assumes that the clash is not between religion and reason but between religions. Ignatief would not be willing to grant that premise. Diane Orenlicher's essay in this issue is from a response at the end of Ignatief's book.

Finally, the essay by Hahm Chaibong takes up a theme that goes back to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The argument was made by the Soviet Union that "human rights" was an ideological ploy by the United States and its allies. (The six nations of the Soviet bloc, along with Saudi Arabia and South Africa, were the only abstainers when the 56 nation U.N. approved the Declaration). Since 1989 a variation on this theme has emerged in Chinese-United States relations, that is, the theme that "human rights" is a tool of Western capitalism. At the heart of "Asian values" in Korea, Japan, Singapore and China is Confucianism which is assumed in the West to be apolitical or politically authoritarian. Choibong takes on the issue of human rights, arguing that there are other ways to preserve and protect human beings than by the legal mechanism of rights. As has also been argued in the "South," that is, Africa and Latin America, persons are best protected by inclusion in community not by isolating the individual in relation to a legally restrained government. A dialogue of the United States with Confucianism is perhaps even more unlikely than with Islam, but eventually the choice is dialogue or dangerous conflict. - G.M.

ISLAM AND THE REST

By Jack Miles

It is easy in the historically Christian cultures of Europe and North America to dismiss conflicts between Muslims and Hindus or even between Jews and Muslims as alien fanaticism. It is almost equally easy to regard struggles of exotic Christianities like Ethiopian Orthodoxy as irrelevant to any such struggle that the once Christian but now secular West might have with Islam.

But to do this is to make a serious mistake if only because from the Muslim side where modernity, Christianity and the West are a single holy stew, all these struggles are understood to be the same struggle. For the West, the defining

struggles of the twentieth century have been, in succession, democracy vs. fascism and democracy vs. communism. But for the Muslim umma, these are simply the latest civil wars in the long, bloody history of the House of Warfare. In the last days of World War II, what mattered in a Muslim country like Morocco was not that racist fascism had been defeated but that the yoke of Christian France might at last be thrown off. In the last days of the Cold War, what mattered in a country like Afghanistan was not that godless communism had been defeated but that the knout had fallen at last from the fist of Christian Russia. The umma had its own reasons for holding the view - common enough in the West for other reasons - that the Soviet Union had simply continued the Russian Empire in a more malignant form. Secularized Christianity, as seen from inside the House of Islam, is simply degenerate Christianity and as such is even more alien to Islam than its ancestor.

Osama bin Laden, to American astonishment, thought that the umma had won the victory over the Soviet Union and would now proceed to win a second victory over the United States. U.S. astonishment at the grandiose claim and U.S. horror at the lethal ambition may stand as a measure of the chasm that separates Western and Muslim civilizations. Unless this chasm can be bridged, the world may slide into a war of terrorist reprisal and counter reprisal with no end in sight.

Where should the work begin? In my judgment, it should begin with theology, a term that naive enthusiasts for globalization tend to use as a synonym for what may be dispensed with or, worse, what gets in the way. But real theology is more than that, and the moment may be at hand for religion to come in from the cold as a topic of international diplomacy.

Because of the secularization of the state in the West and concomitant privatization of religion, Western governments, when dealing with one another, do not expect to be required to deal with one another's religious beliefs or religious leaders. But in the House of Islam, religious leaders typically have a far greater claim on the public than do civilian leaders, and it is a fatal mistake to leave the Muslim public - the umma - out of the equation. At the end of World War I, Britain and France vastly overestimated the importance of Arab nationalism and correspondingly underestimated the importance of Muslim religion as an organizing principle in the polity they sought to construct on the ruins of the Turkish Empire. In effect, the British and the French were psychologically incapable of dealing with the Middle East other than through leaders manufactured to resemble their nominally religious but passionately nationalist selves. They were at a big loss when confronted with a culture whose real leaders were passionately religious and only nominally nationalist.

After 1956, when the United States became the dominant power in the Middle East, it made the same mistake - vastly overestimating Iranian nationalism

represented by the Shah and correspondingly underestimating Muslim religion as represented by Ayatollah Khomeini. It was as if the United States had to find someone like the Shah to deal with because how could a self-respecting secretary of state possibly do business with an ayatollah. What could they discuss? Theology?

Secretaries of state may have to learn some theology if the current clash between Western and Muslim civilizations is to yield to disengagement and peaceful coexistence. If Osama bin Laden is a spiritual leader with military designs on the United States, the first, crucial insight should be that he and his movement must be dealt with as they are. To suppose that we can achieve security by dealing with him as a common criminal and Muslim governments that harbor his movement as secular governments unconcerned with the religious dimensions in his appeal is to fight this new war as if it were the last war.

To say this is not to dignify the man but to recognize that containing the threat he poses may entail promoting a true alternative to him in the world where he originates. This task, in turn, will require more theology than it takes to issue a routine and utterly uninformed declaration that, of course, Osama bin Laden does not represent true Islam. Will the real Islam stand up? This is the kind of question that our military and diplomatic institutions are designed never to ask and never to notice that they are not asking.

Engaging a jihad for the soul of Islam as if it were an international manhunt for a common criminal is a battle plan guaranteed to fail. How can we make war against the nations that have harbored the agents of Osama bin Laden when the United States itself is one of those nations? We have done so unwillingly and unwittingly, but was Egypt witting or willing to harbor the Muslim Brotherhood agents who assassinated President Anwar Sadat? So far the paper trail left by the World Trade Center saboteurs has led to friendly Arab states like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates rather than to Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan. Is this not just what one would expect of a movement out to conceal its tracks and frustrate retaliation? Though bin Laden declared himself the enemy of virtually every Muslim government except the Taliban regime, some Muslim regimes clearly stood higher on his enemies list than others. How very clever to implicate just those regimes in his crimes.

But in the long run, there cannot be any definitive sorting out of good Muslim states from bad ones. It is the Muslim umma as a whole that has harbored this murderous movement within , and it is the Muslim umma as a whole that must somehow be persuaded to break with it. Peace will come not when any one terrorist and his network of secret agents have been surgically excised but when an authentic vision has emerged within the House of Islam that makes the

vision of victory by terrorism irrelevant and unwelcome.

The development of such an alternative vision, however, will require a major paradigm shift in Western diplomacy. It will no longer suffice to treat religion as a mere happenstance (A happen to be Jewish,@A happen to be Muslim@ and therefore as a political irrelevancy. This way of dealing with religion politically may have served us well enough in overcoming Christianity's own hideous wars of religion. But the old way will not meet this new challenge, for it takes off the table just the topic that militant Islam finds most compelling. One can no more discuss communism without discussing ideology. Theology is the ideological element in religion, and nothing at this moment could be more tragically evident than that we have ignored it at our peril.

If United States Muslims, clearly a key community at this juncture, can muster the necessary courage and intelligence, the question that must then be asked is: Will they find courageous and appropriately educated allies in Washington - allies for whom theology is not ~~theology~~? To make the needed difference, the Muslim communities of the West must be dignified with much more than the occasional courtesy invitations to the diplomatic dinner table. They must be not just cultivated as allies of convenience but heard and honored as teachers. They must be protected and supported both materially and spiritually as they take on the enormous challenge of raising from their own ranks the leadership that will save two worlds at once.

ENGAGING RELIGION

By Diane Orentlicher

Universal acceptance of the human rights idea depends upon its legitimation within diverse religious traditions, and not just alongside them. In the near term, for example, it is difficult to imagine further progress - and here I mean human rights progress - in Iran that is not rooted in and justified by reformist clerics= progressive interpretation of Islam.

As Addullahi An-Na'im has argued, Anternational human rights norms are unlikely to be accepted by governments...and respected in practice, without strong legitimation within national politics,@and this includes broad acceptance of human rights norms as being at least consistent with the religious beliefs of the population. This may and often does require adherents to diverse religions to reinterpret some of the precepts of their religions in light of international human rights standards. The idea of human rights is revolutionary not because it challenges state power, as has so often been noted, but also because it often requires transformation of fundamental belief systems. For this reason I am inclined to share An-Na'im's belief that human rights advocates would do well to

seriously engage religion rather than seek to exclude religious discourse from the intercultural process of constructing and construing human rights.

This type of engagement need not heighten the risks of idolatry against which Michael Ignatieff cautions vigilance. To be willing genuinely to engage disparate perspectives should not be confused with undertaking to find a common consensus on the metaphysics of rights at the end of the dialogue. Rather, Ignatieff gets the point precisely right when he implores us to respect the reasoned commitment of others, to commit ourselves to remain in the same room when confronted with claims one doesn't like to hear.

It is not apparent why a more skeptical approach is warranted when the claims one doesn't like to hear are religious. As Michael Perry has argued, to accept the proposition that the idea of human rights is ineliminably religious does not require a commitment to any particular religion. Much less does a willingness to engage religion in the ongoing dialogue that defines the human rights movement entail a surrender of commitment to pluralism or a greater tendency toward idolatrous zeal. Indeed, greater engagement of religion - or more to the point, of plural religious perspectives - by human rights advocates would surely enhance the type of cross-cultural dialogue that operates as a check against absolutism.

Such engagement may be necessary if the idea of human rights is to take root within the deepest commitments of individuals across diverse systems of belief, tradition and culture. Human rights cannot go truly global unless it goes deeply local. Only when this happens, can the idea of human rights achieve its radically transformative aims.

CONFUCIANISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS HAHM CHAIBONG

Confucianism does not seek to limit the power of the government by appealing to human rights, or by instituting legal mechanisms and procedures. In fact, it explicitly rejects the law as the best means for limiting the power of government and instituting a humane society. Confucius regarded legalism and proceduralism as insufficient or inappropriate for building an ideal society. If you lead them by means of government and keep order among them by means of punishments, the people are without conscience in evading them. If you lead them by means of virtue and keep order among them by means of ritual, they have a conscience and moreover will submit.

How, then, did Confucianism seek to limit abuses by the government? By educating people who would embody such virtues as ren (human heartedness and compassion), yi (justice), li (propriety, ritual), zhi (knowledge) and shen

(trust). Confucians through the ages tried to institute barriers against the abuse of power on the part of the king, state, warlords, and aristocracy.

Many Confucian apologists, confronted with the criticism that Confucianism lacks the concept of human rights, set out to discover its equivalent somewhere in the canon, if only in embryonic form. However, the way to defend Confucianism is not to show that it too has honored rights from the beginning, unbeknownst to itself. This is already to cede the debate to liberalism. Even if the concept of rights can be found in the canon this only makes Confucianism a pale imitation of liberalism at its best. In fact, if Confucianism too is shown to be a rights-based theory, the reason for retaining it would be undercut. It would be better to embrace liberalism and try to indigenize it, rather than trying to preserve a poor imitation of it. After all, throughout world history, alien philosophies have been accepted by civilizations, often producing a dazzling new synthesis.

There is no a priori reason why a tradition has to be preserved simply because it is a tradition. When philosophical and ethical systems are defended on nationalistic or other particular grounds, they quickly lose their force and theoretical vitality. When we make an ethical statement, we are making a universal statement. It is in the nature of ethical and moral judgments that they apply to all analogous contexts and situations regardless of cultural differences. To make an ethical judgment only to claim that it only applies to a certain culture is to deny its ethical character.

Confucians throughout history have espoused their philosophy because they thought it was true, not because it was Chinese or because it served some other nationalistic purpose. The same, of course, has been the case with Christianity and liberalism. Pope John II would never claim that Roman Catholicism is applicable only to Europeans and Latin Americans. Nor do liberals claim that human rights are relevant only to Anglo-Saxons or Europeans. In fact this is why we are having an Asian values debate in the first place. Many will say and have said that such pretensions to universality show the arrogance of the West, but also that they have been used to justify imperialism and colonial exploitation. This has clearly been the case. But one should note that it is only because of their claim to universality that they could be used for such purposes.

What I mean to say by making this rather obvious point is that the response to such claims to universality should not be a denunciation and a claim to particularism, as has typically been the case. Until now, the terms of the Asian values debate has come to be structured in such a way that its defenders have mostly resorted to condemning the imperialistic self-righteousness of the defenders of human rights while claiming the right to preserve one's particular culture. However, to claim that Confucianism is fit only for a particular people or

nation is to commit a fundamental political and theoretical mistake.

The right way to defend Confucianism is to show that it defends those values that are promoted by the liberal notion of human rights, but does so on its own terms. One needs to go a step further by showing that Confucianism also defends and preserves important values that liberalism ignores. One should never abandon the claim to universality. Confucianism is not just for the Chinese, Singaporeans, Koreans, Japanese, etc. It is for all humanity. If one is not confident enough to make such an assertion, but instead defends Confucianism as merely a culture or tradition that should be respected and preserved simply because it is Asian, Confucianism and other Asian values will never be able to contribute to the formulation of a truly universalistic ethics.

The Asian values debate has been raging for over a decade. We need to take the debate away from those who have been using it to rationalize political repression, as well as from those who have been using it to engage in self-righteous liberal proselytizing. It needs to be made clear that Asian value systems such as Confucianism do not endorse or even tolerate political repression of the sort that liberals take pride in opposing.

Ultimately, liberals have to be more willing to study and understand Asian beliefs and traditions if they wish to participate in the debate. For their part, the advocates of Asian values need to arrive at a better understanding of how to go about advocating them. Once we become clear on these points, we can embark on the worthwhile project of inter-civilizational dialogue with an eye toward constructing a truly universal value system.

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