

## CIVILISATION AND DIALOGUE

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*For the first time in human history, civilisations, cultures and communities are compelled to relate to one other on a constant and continuous basis. Yet mutual ignorance exacerbated by mutual suspicion and hostility inhibit them from establishing ties that endure and flourish. Sometimes hostility erupts into bloody conflicts ... indeed, communal violence has become the bane of mankind ... Dialogue and mutual understanding are the prerequisites for building just and equitable relations between cultures and civilisations.*

Extract from a brochure introducing The Centre for Civilisational Dialogue these words are what first attracted me to the Centre several years ago. They struck a chord, as they would with any philosopher. Why?

- Philosophers detest ignorance, especially when ignorance is the basis for actions to coerce other people. The earliest systematic Western philosopher, Socrates, believed that ignorance is the only obstacle to virtue.
- It takes two to philosophise. There are some things one can successfully do by oneself, but philosophy is not one of them.
- Dialogue (literally, a dialogue is a game for two, but like the Centre, I use the term to include conversations and discussions between two or more parties) has been recognised in many cultures as the way to move closer to philosophical clarity

and understanding - again, this was the method used by Socrates.

- Philosophers can be argumentative and (mentioning no names) even obnoxious, but mutual suspicion and hostility are not characteristic of philosophical relations. The “philosophical café”, popular in New Zealand and Australia, where professors and students get together to discuss philosophical issues over tea or coffee, is an attractive metaphor for civilised dialogue - especially when the affluent professors pay for the impoverished students’ refreshments.
- Ethics, minimally, is meant to reduce conflict, because it promotes shared values and applies them to real situations. Most philosophers accept that force may be justified in extreme circumstances, but only when it has become clear that a solution through dialogue is impossible.
- All philosophers advocate justice and equity.

The philosophical enterprise, as I see it, is that reasonable, civilised people will sit down together and try to sort out:

- Where they agree and disagree.
- Which areas of agreement and disagreement are important and which do not matter.
- What they are going to do about important areas of agreement and disagreement.

### **Civilisation**

I use the term civilised dialogue because my scope includes dialogues within as well as between “civilisations, cultures and communities”. However, the concept of civilisation is a broad one, and there are many definitions of civilisation.

Khondker, in his article (2003) discussed later, notes that

“civilisation” is often used in a neutral, descriptive way, for instance,

*The way that people are born, live, love, get married, think, believe, laugh, feed and clothe themselves, build houses and group their fields together, and behave towards each other.*

(Latouche, 1996: 42)

However, he notes that the concept of civilisation is also a normative one, quoting approvingly Whitehead’s definition: “a society exhibiting the qualities of Truth, Beauty, Adventure, Art, Peace” (cited Fernandez-Arnesto, 2000: 20).

Certainly the term “civilised” is normative, though morally ambiguous, as it has been used to justify oppression of those judged to be “uncivilised”. The term comes from ancient Greece, though the idea is undoubtedly much older. For Aristotle, (c.325 BCE) the world was divided into civilised people (Greeks) and barbarians (everyone else). Greeks were civilised because they were intelligent, rational and creative, and lived by laws and institutions based on philosophical principles. They were naturally superior to barbarians, who were stupid, irrational and incapable of creating art, philosophy, or ordered societies. Thus slavery (of barbarians, for Greek masters) was part of the natural order of things. In fact it was in the interests of slaves just as much as of masters, because as slaves in Greece they might learn to become relatively civilised.

Apologists for slavery in the United States produced similar, equally meretricious arguments. George Fitzhugh (1854, cited in Davis, 1996: 110), wrote:

*The earliest civilisation of which history gives account is that of Egypt. The Negro was always in contact with that civilisation. For four thousand years he has had opportunities of becoming civilised. Like the wild horse, he must be caught, tamed and domesticated ...*

*The Southerner is the Negro's friend, his only friend. Let no intermeddling abolitionist, no refined philosophy, dissolve this friendship.*

Civilisation is often identified with doing things the “Western” way, even in the works of the great liberal hero John Stuart Mill (1859). Mill's famous principle of liberty is:

*That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.*

*However, Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others, must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury. [Thus] we may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage ... Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians ...*

Even in modern Malaysia the colonialist term “backwardness” has been used to refer to a traditional as opposed to a “modern” way of life. Those who oppose coercive “modernisation” are sometimes condemned as “romantics” who want “backward tribes” to be condemned to live in a primitive “human zoo” where they can “live a life of idyllic simplicity untroubled by echoes from the outside world”. However, “It is our duty ... to endeavour to fit the natives for the struggle that lies before them ... to the new world that is being opened up for them.”<sup>1</sup>

As these examples show, different conceptions of civilisation can be used as a basis for a variety of policies. Nonetheless, there is a core of goodness captured in the term and its cognates. A civil person is a polite person; civility is a synonym for politeness. To people who have a choice, it generally seems better to live in Toynbee's “society exhibiting the qualities of Truth, Beauty, Adventure,

Art, Peace” rather than in a Hobbesian state of nature (see below). When a society (such as post-Roman Britain or, in recent years, Zimbabwe) loses these qualities and they are replaced by lies and deception, ugliness, loss of confidence and fear of the unknown, ignorance, boredom, insecurity, aggression, brutishness and conflict, there is a sense of loss.

### Centre publications on civilisation

Among the Centre’s contributions to dialogue are a series of monographs, all of which aim to increase understanding of different cultures, and to show how greater understanding contributes to human flourishing. Here I provide brief summaries of three.

James Morris, Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter, UK, in *Understanding Religions and Inter-Religious Understanding: Four Classical Muslim Studies*, argues that “Whatever we discover about the religious life of others necessarily deepens and enriches our own understanding of humanity.” However, we need to study religions in “concrete historical situations”, not merely in the abstract. For instance, the teachings of Abu Hamid Grazali cannot be properly understood without a knowledge of the bloody conflicts between different Islamic sects. These insights then need to be “translated into effective communication and co-operative action”. He vividly illustrates his point by likening the person who believes that a theoretical understanding of religious conflict enables one to solve it to someone who thinks that we can solve “struggles due to mental disorders, familial discord, addiction and abuse simply by reading a few good textbooks in psychology and therapy”.

Leonard Swidler, author of *Our Understanding of Ultimate Reality Shapes Our Actions*, is Professor of Catholic Thought and Inter-Religious Dialogue at Temple University, Philadelphia, USA. He illustrates his position that “How we conceive of reality determines

how we will act" with this example:

*Whether I think ... that my child's illness is because of the karma of a previous life, or because someone is sticking pins in a doll image of her, or because she has had contact with some bacteria, determines how I act in response - and doubtless whether or not my child lives. ... Thus, philosophy and theology - how I understand reality ultimately - are profoundly practical!*

Like Morris, he argues that in order to engage in worthwhile dialogue we need to understand where the "other/s is/are coming from"; such an understanding also helps us understand ourselves better, thus further promoting effective dialogue.

Humans, he says, are moving away from seeing Ultimate Reality in "absolutist, exclusivist concepts and terms" to a more "dialogic mental framework - not giving up our particular convictions, but also becoming increasingly aware that they can only be a partial picture of Reality." This he calls "Deep-Dialogue", "to stand on our position, and at the same time seek self-transformation through opening ourselves to those who think differently."

He concludes that as we change our perception of reality so our behaviour will also change and become more open, dialogic, nuanced. It will also become more humble, because the richer our knowledge becomes, the more we will realize how limited our knowledge really is. Thus, humanity will tend to emulate Socrates, who realized that the wise person is the one who knows that he does not know.

Habibul Haque Khondker is a professor at the National University of Singapore. In *Clashing States, Hidden Civilizations: Beyond Huntington* he presents an account and discussion of Huntington's thesis which is, briefly, that the world is moving into a phase where conflicts will primarily be between cultures, civilisations

and religions. Moreover, the optimistic idea that international conflict will disappear in the future because of globalisation is unrealistic. Since 1993, events such as September 11 2001, the Iraq War, religion based violence in India, "ethnic cleansing" in the Balkans and ethnic conflict in Ruanda and Burundi seem to support Huntington's thesis: "All these gave a life imitating social science quality".

However, Khondker criticises him for essentialising and simplifying cultures, religions and civilisations. He quotes Edward Said (2001):

*The personification of enormous entities called "the West" and "Islam" is recklessly affirmed, as if hugely complicated matters such as identity and culture existed in a cartoon-like world where Popeye and Brutus [actually Bluto] bash each other mercilessly, with one always more virtuous pugilist getting the hand over his adversary.*

But this is not how things are: "The world is becoming multi-cultural and multi-ethnic." Skidmore (1998) notes the success of "multicivilizational economic and political organizations", such as ASEAN, APEC, NAFTA and the WTO. Moreover,

There is no clash of civilizations between Islam and the West. The really decisive battle is taking place within Muslim civilization, where ultra conservatives compete against moderates and democrats for the soul of the Muslim public.

The writer summarises and comments on a number of conceptions of civilisation, concluding by advocating Rabindranath Tagore's notion of civilisation as "an adventure of our ability to share, borrow and learn from each other".

### **Obstacles to civilised dialogue**

One obstacle is definitional: participants are using the same language but in different senses. For example, philosophers are committed to justice and equity, but they do not always agree about the meaning of these concepts. Centrally, justice is concerned with how people are treated, particularly how they are treated relative to others. Thus justice has a procedural aspect, requiring, for instance, impartial, fair procedures in the criminal justice system. Another procedural aspect is equality of opportunity, for instance, the right to be considered impartially for a job based on one's relevant and fairly earned qualifications and experience. Justice is also concerned with fair distribution of benefits and burdens, with differences being determined only by relevant factors.

So far, so good. But there are many different conceptions of fair procedures. For instance, is equality of opportunity compatible with affirmative action, where one group is perceived as unfairly disadvantaged, for instance African-Americans in the US. Are quota systems for access to employment and education just, if they help the supposedly disadvantaged?

Issues of distributive justice are if anything even harder to resolve. For instance, some people see justice in health care as consisting in responding to need, and argue that the public health system should provide the best care for all who need it. But no country has the resources to do this. However, an increasing number of countries can at least provide a "decent minimum" of health care. Should the state provide this? Should better off people be able to access whatever health care they are willing to pay for? What does justice require?

Clearly, then, this is not merely a quibble about words; it is literally a matter of life and death. Millions of people around the world die of starvation every year. Does our commitment to justice require us to help feed these people (Singer, 1972), or is it merely nature's way of dealing with overpopulation? If the latter, we had



better not interfere or we will, ultimately, make the problem worse (Hardin, 1974).

Another obstacle is disagreements about facts. Of course, it is possible to have a civilised dialogue about factual claims, accompanied by appropriate empirical investigation in a spirit of open-minded inquiry. The controversial issue of genetic modification needs to be approached in this way. A refusal to do this, for fear that the facts might turn out to be inconvenient, prevents dialogue. Even worse is the practice of pretending not to believe what one knows to be true, for instance tobacco and asbestos company spokespersons denying that their products harm health, or politicians claiming that some state of affairs is the case when they know it isn't, as in the imaginary Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction" or that actual historic events never occurred, for example the Nazi Holocaust. This practice is most dangerous where those doing the lying are influential public figures such as political, religious and business leaders, thus encouraging gullible and ignorant folk to hold the same beliefs.

A third obstacle is more difficult to explain. It occurs when one or more parties to an unimportant difference of opinion insists on making an issue of it. The problem, of course, is getting agreement on what is important and what isn't. I imagine that no-one thinks it is inherently better to drive on the left side of the road rather than the right - it doesn't matter which side we drive on so long as we all drive on the same side. It doesn't matter if your favourite colour is blue and mine is green. At the other extreme, almost everyone today agrees about the wrongfulness of slavery so there's not much room for debate there either.

However, many issues are not so straightforward. Many people believe that abortion is just a matter for decision by individual woman and not a moral issue because the foetus is not yet a person with rights, while others believe that it is a person from conception and that, like a pregnant woman, it has rights too. Women have died for lack of access to safe, legal abortion and; in the US,

several doctors have been murdered by anti-abortionists.

Problems arise when issues of principle are insisted on in cases where following the principle would have enormous costs. Thankfully, the world's religions usually allow for exceptional cases. For example, a Catholic doctor may carry out an abortion to save a pregnant woman's life; a Muslim or Jew would feed their children normally forbidden unclean foods if, in an emergency, there was nothing else to eat; a Buddhist may kill if that is the only way to prevent mass murder.

An example where many people would agree that a principle was carried too far was the case of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* that in September 2005 ran a series of 12 cartoons, mostly depicting the prophet Mohammed, that were extremely offensive to many Muslims. The principle at stake was freedom of expression. The editor had decided to ask cartoonists to "draw Mohammed as you see him" after a series of controversies in Denmark, and elsewhere in Europe, about whether the media were practising self-censorship by not criticizing Islam, whereas they were happy to criticize, or mock, other religions (Rose, 2006). Certainly, they were not in violation of Danish law and some people argued that the value of the right to freedom of expression sometimes needs to be asserted in ways that offend and upset others, just to demonstrate our commitment to it. Moreover, nobody can claim a general right not to be offended, otherwise almost every expression of opinion, would have to be banned. Nonetheless, it may be said, gratuitously offending a large number of people is uncivilised. The costs of this action have certainly been high - Danish embassies in some countries were attacked and some Muslim countries banned imports of products from Denmark, costing the Danish economy USD170 million in the period to June 2006.

A fourth problem is that a tradition of civilised dialogue does not simply happen all by itself. It is unreasonable to expect people who have grown up in an atmosphere of mutual distrust, fear and hatred,

where violence is the normal way of settling disputes, or where there is a long tradition of unquestioning obedience to the central dictatorial power, to suddenly sit down and engage in civilised dialogue. Even if they agree to give it a try, they may simply lack the skills needed to engage in such unfamiliar activities. In extreme cases, it may take decades of education and reconciliation before people can talk to each other - really talk, as equals with mutual respect. An obvious example is the US where slavery was abolished in 1865 (in most states, it had been abolished earlier) and yet there is still mutual mistrust and hatred. But slavery had lasted 200 years, and until the 1960s, the federal government showed absolutely no commitment to abolishing segregation and protecting political rights for African-Americans.

In other situations, a simple change in political leadership can encourage civilised dialogue in a community. The polarised, often spiteful tone of public life in Britain that mirrored the confrontational style of the Thatcher government didn't go away overnight, but the atmosphere in present day Britain is very different.

Of course, there are many other obstacles to civilised dialogue. For instance, philosophers in many cultures have identified spurious forms of argument as fallacies, details of which can be found in any textbook on logic or critical reasoning (I recommend *Bowell and Kemp, 2001*). But the biggest obstacle to civilised dialogue is the refusal to engage in dialogue at all. While it is wildly unlikely that a resumption of talks between Israel and Palestine will rapidly lead to peace in the region, some kind of dialogue is obviously necessary to bring about even a minimal improvement of the situation.

On the positive side, it has often been argued that reasonable people can come to agree on ethical issues by putting themselves in the position of others - an example is the formulation of the Golden Rule in Christianity (and also in other religions) of doing to others what you would want them to do to you if the situation were reversed and you were, as it were, in their shoes. In political philosophy, social

contract theory has a similar foundation. There are a number of variations of this theory, the most influential in recent times being that of John Rawls (1971). Rawls asks us to imagine that we are setting up a society from scratch, and trying to agree on the rules and institutions of the society. To ensure that we vote impartially, Rawls asks us to further imagine that we do not know anything about our role in society - whether we will be male or female, young or old, rich or poor, nor what our health state, intelligence, family situation etc will be. Rawls thinks that, on the basis of rational self-interest, we will vote for a relatively egalitarian society without huge disparities of wealth and power. We will not, for instance, vote for slavery, since we won't know whether we will end as slaves ourselves. We will vote for equality of opportunity and non-discrimination, a good public education system and at least a decent minimum level of public health care, again because we don't know what our needs will be or whether we will be in a position to meet them from our own resources. We will choose a society in which individual freedom is valued and respected, though not at the expense of the well-being of others. We will vote for a civilised society.

This may appear to be a somewhat "Western" view of the world implying that, if we could choose, we would all live in Canada, Scandinavia, Australia or New Zealand, though not the US. But it also sounds a lot like Malaysia. It is the sort of society that we might expect genuine followers of religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity, as well as secular liberals, to approve of. Inglehart and Norris (2003, cited in Khondker, 2003) found that:

*... democracy has an overwhelmingly positive image throughout the world. In country after country, a clear majority of the population describes "having a democratic political system" as either "good" or "very good" ... With the exception of Pakistan, most of the Muslim countries surveyed think highly of democracy: in Albania, Egypt, Bangladesh, Azerbaijan, Indonesia, Morocco, and Turkey, 92 to 99 percent of the population*

*endorsed democratic institutions – a higher proportion than in the United States.*

Bear in mind, too, that in societies that are very unequal, and have repressive regimes it is those whose interests are served by them that defend them. I have come across no published defence of slavery written by slaves. This is not because slaves (when freed, at least) didn't write books; hundreds were published in the US in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. People who languish for years in foul jails without charge, or are tortured to get them to admit to crimes they did not commit, do not sing the praises of their criminal justice system. Americans who have no homes or health care don't vote for the Libertarian Party.

Perhaps, as portrayed in Willliam Golding's (1954) novel *Lord of the Flies*, civilisation is indeed fragile and may break down whenever the restraints of formal society are removed. Maybe, each of us, if given a ring that makes him or her invisible, would use it for selfish advantage, as the cynical character Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic* (c.370 BCE) insists would happen.

But then again, perhaps good will ultimately triumph over evil, as it does in one of the world's oldest and greatest epics, the *Ramayana*. While we have to put in place mechanisms to try to ensure that those entrusted with power will behave responsibly, ultimately we have to hope that, like Gandalf and Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954) the good will choose to reject uncontrollable rings of power, as the leaders of today's great powers might eventually reject their nuclear weapons of mass destruction.

### **Afterword**

Obviously, the world is not and cannot be perfect. As Francis Bacon (1605) wrote,

*Philosophers make laws for imaginary commonwealths, and their discourses are as the stars, which give little light, because they are so high.*

Nobody (certainly not philosophers) is perfectly rational. But we are committed to use reason as far as it can take us, not just in a negative way, to deal with problems, but more importantly, to prevent problems from arising, and to make progress.

At the same time, many Western philosophers believe that reason has limits: it may help us to understand and manipulate the world but it cannot tell us how we should behave, since that is ultimately a matter of values and we cannot come to know values through reason alone. This, of course, provides a further reason for engaging in dialogue.

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#### **Footnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> These quotations are from the Preface (by Captain Dudley Morgan) and Foreword (by the Chief Minister of Sarawak, Pehin Sri Dr. Haji Abdul Taid Mahmud, to Ritchie (2005).