

## Coexistence and Cooperation of Civilizations

By Heinz Theisen

*In addition to the clash of cultures (Islamists against the West) and the fight in the cultures (Sunnis against Shiites) there is a struggle of generations. Youths in Teheran, Cairo and Istanbul fight for their individual interests - against old oligarchies and collective identities. The migration processes are mostly directed towards Europe, not towards traditional cultures. In the long run, the modern civilization is the only alternative to the clash of old cultural identities.*

Different cultures are characterized by different value systems. In case they meet one another in the globalization process, this will increasingly result in value and identity conflicts. This does not apply equally to all cultures, and the conflicts therefore do not always result in a clash of civilizations. Many world cultures, as e.g. the Chinese or Indian, make no claim to universality and are only in certain areas a challenge for the West. With Islamism it is different. Due to its strong connection between religion and politics it is not compatible with the secular Western culture. The latter is characterized by the separation of state and religion, and challenged by Islamism's claim to universal dominion.

Depending on the cultural area, the living and working together has to be shaped differently. A closer political cooperation suggests itself rather with the not only geographically adjacent Russian Orthodox culture than with

China, where substantially different conceptions of fairness and reciprocity prevail. What we need in the case of Beijing is some form of coopetition, i.e. a mixture of cooperation and competition. China is a brilliant master of this art, and picks out the raisins from globalization. What is needed against the challenges of Islamism, however, are clear edges and demarcations. But this should not rule out the infiltration of those extremist religious zealots by economic cooperation.

## **Confused Alliances**

With regard to the turmoil in the Middle East and northern Africa, the self-limitation of the West becomes a question of self-assertion. The military interventions from Afghanistan to Libya have only increased our entanglement and endangerment. For the Middle East, the American political scientist Samuel Huntington's (1927-2008) analysis of the "Clash of Civilizations" was even too optimistic. Here, in fact, cultures such as the Jewish and Muslim, the Western and the Islamic fight against each other. But even internal cultural conflicts came in addition. Between the two most important Islamic movements of the Shiites and the Sunnis, the immemorial inheritance dispute over Muhammad's successor has turned into the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In Syria, their proxies currently destroy a formerly multi-religious country.

The fights split the Islamic countries along the religions and ethnic groups. In the alliances between old and new powers, it is accordingly all haywire. They defy all logic. The alliances are constantly changing. Theocratic regimes which set up a theocracy give secularists their backing; tyrants talk in favor of democracy; the United States join forces with Islamists; the

latter, in turn, for the benefit of themselves, demand the military intervention of the West against Assad. Saudi Arabia supports in Egypt Secularists against Muslim Brotherhood and in other places Salafis against Secularists. America forms an alliance with Iraq, which in turn is - via the Shiite majority - connected with Iran; the latter in turn supports the regime in Syria. The U.S. maintains both an alliance with Qatar, which subsidizes the terrorist Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and with Saudi Arabia, which financed the Salafis. The latter in turn inform the jihadists who want to kill every American.

According to the Middle East experts Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, this new "system" of confused alliances is based on many false assumptions, conceals too many irreconcilable differences, is unnatural and will not end well. The power of the West, as intervention force, is just sufficient to enforce local military decisions. But it is no longer sufficient to bring really order to the chaos. We therefore have the choice to become a part of the chaos or to remain on the sidelines.

## **Borderlines Recur**

The recurrence of the cultures also means the return of borderlines, in the ethnic separatism, which has led in the Balkans or the Caucasus to secessions, in the Russian and Chinese nationalism, as well as in Islamism. What matters for them is to retain their own, particular, special reality and particular interests in face of the global boundlessness. The recurrence of borderlines sets also boundaries to the reveries of a "global civil society", "Global Governance", i.e. the enforcement of global regulations, and the "universality of human rights."

In the opposite extreme to universalism, this could result in a new policy of particularism, which already between 1914 and 1945 has driven the world in the abysses of nationalism. The dangers of nationalism are by no means at the other end of the earth. Since the Second World War, the number of nations has tripled from 74 in 1946 to 204 countries today. Some of those States became impoverished after the separation from the powerful core country; others are now richer and better governed than the former great empire, in which the common weal has been sacrificed to most diverse interests.

The return of political boundaries means the rejection of the utopian dreams of globalization and universalization, which have promoted the slipping down into the clash of civilization. However, what we need is the balance between closeness and distance instead of strictly dissociating ourselves from each other. Boundaries belong to the realities of life at every level. They enable the diversity of cultures and civilizations. This pluralism is preferable to a unipolar world order, i.e. an order that is controlled by one major power, for the very reason that it enables the competition of ideas.

## **Fire Service instead of Police Operations**

The western universalism knew no longer enemies, opponents and contradictions and thus contributed significantly to the overextension of our material and spiritual capabilities. It is now helplessly faced with the erupted particularistic culture struggles. Those who recognize the borderlines see the need for a multipolar and multicultural world order, which can only be built and sustained by many power centers. In this kind of world order the West, which overestimates itself, is dependent on the cooperation with other major powers - especially with

the neighboring Russia, and so the West should neither poach States from their environment for alliances nor act the teacher towards them. We are no longer able to afford to use the universality of our ideals as a benchmark for the evaluation of Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan. Against non-political forces of the economy and also of crime, the world of states is long since on the defensive and must join forces.

More and more states join new alliances, often along the lines of the European Economic Community in the post-war period. In a more differentiated phase of globalization, the United States and Europe can no longer separately face the challenges. The idea of an Atlantic free trade area goes in the direction of reshaping the Western community of shared interests and values. A fair free trade implies comparable working conditions, social security contributions and environmental regulations among the competitors.

In foreign and security policy, the trend is away from the military interventions of the last decade to limited relief operations. Some countries of the West are still ready for firefighting operations - as in Mali. International police operations, in which each policeman must be protected against the entire population, are hardly any longer open to debate. The new military modesty becomes apparent in the recent refraining from a military intervention in Syria, and in the case of Mali in the fact that there will be no Western nation building. The local powers have to look after the building up and the stability of their regions and their nation, in order to relieve the strained West. The West had to learn not to regard all the crises in all regions of the world as its problem.

All the more, we have to assert ourselves in the clash of civilizations. Islamism is an enemy of open culture, in the same way as it was the system of the Soviet Union. The

cultural incompatibility with the radical Muslim system of government is as insurmountable as it was the ideological border in the East-West conflict. As the Western defense alliance, the NATO has on the one hand refrained from interventions in the Soviet system, on the other hand drawn clear borderlines of its own sphere. In the ideologically irreconcilable antagonism of the East-West conflict, there was no other way than the simultaneity of deterrence, containment, and - where possible - relaxation. The attractions of trade helped to develop the enemy to an opponent and in the end to a partner. In the end, history decided.

The same goes nowadays for the Islamic world. We have to contain the Islamic state, in cooperation with Russia, Iran and Saudi-Arabia, we have to coexist with Iran and Saudi-Arabia, and we have to be neutral against the conflicts between Iran and Saudi-Arabia und we have to balance these powers like Henry Kissinger did between China and the Soviet system. In the end, we hope that the attractions of trade and modern life style will change the systems from within and will help to develop enemies to opponents and in the end to partners. The growing individualism within the next generation is a signal, that this vision could be successful.

## **The Moral of Realpolitik**

Our values are universal. The best response to cultural isolation would be the general validity of universal human rights. Since we are far away from this ideal, what only matters in realpolitik of cultures are to expound paths towards that objective. Human rights, separation of powers and rule of law are humanitarian achievements. Where they are lacking, every community will sooner or later be in jeopardy. But

according to the historian Heinrich August Winkler, it is impossible to impose this insight upon anybody.

A moral realpolitik seeks the balance between ideals and interests. It recognizes that States pursue other topics than morality: stability of the international order, security against attacks of all kinds, unrestricted commercial routes, and a reliable supply of raw materials. Such an orientation towards what is necessary and possible means no reduction to mere interest politics. Similarly, different identities, cultures and religions cannot be left out of account. Realpolitik of cultures includes the spiritual and cultural components as essential factors in today's world, without exalting them as the sole, decisive element. Foreign policy will always be a balancing act between ideals and interests.

The West has to say goodbye to its predominance, and fit into a multi-polar world order that has to be established. It is on the decline. The former colonies forge ahead demographically, economically and power politically. The West should stick to his ideals and self-critically deal with its history, which was for long periods a history of violations of its own ideals. For this reason alone we should replace a Universalist moralism by an "ethical realism". It includes rules of conduct such as caution, humility towards inevitabilities, studying cultures, responsibility for the consequences, and acceptance of the value systems of other cultures.

## **From Universalism to Coexistence**

In the long term, the old paradigms, the old thought patterns and models for understanding of culturalism and of collective identities will give way to individual economic interests and

emancipations. This means that the importance of culture for a society should not be made absolute. A human being is admittedly a cultural being, but in life and in living and working together also other things are of outstanding importance. In addition to the Holy there is also the profane reality. The absolute entities are accompanied by relative entities. The tendencies to standardize are confronted with the will for diversity. In this area of tension, new things constantly develop. Cultures are as little permanently fixed as societies or States. But change usually happens in conflicts, through self-destruction or the extinction of old thinking. Only after the demise of the old generation, in the Middle East the hour of the new generation will come.

But the West should not allow to get tangled up in political struggles, e.g. between secular dictators and Islamists, between ethnic groups and generations. It may nevertheless use its various systems of action for the international relations. The different activities and approaches, e.g. of economic corporations, governments, churches and NGOs, are not an expression of "hypocrisy" but the result of their division of tasks. Churches and NGOs have to fight for human rights in other cultures, while at the same time the businessmen do there their business, and politics diplomatically looks for reciprocities. The one complements the other, provided that you do not absolutize one of the tasks.

This division of tasks would set limits to the western universalism, without that we betray our ideals. The merely indirect exertion of influence secures more prestige to the 'soft power' of the West than political or even military interventions. The preconditions of development are more influenced by education, science, technology and economics than by political structures. From education, clarification,

communication those forces of freedom and individuality may emerge, which are today noticeable among young people - worldwide and across cultures. Hopefully, this will someday help to stop also the clash of civilizations and the struggle in the cultures.

## **Individualism: "I" instead of "We"**

Rafik is a student at the University of Bethlehem. He was born in Haifa, has an Israeli passport, and lives in East Jerusalem. After examination he wants to open an Arabic food restaurant in Austria. When I asked whether he sees himself as an Israeli, as Palestinians or soon as an Austrian, he replied tersely, "I hate politics." Politics, in the sense of actions of communities that are built on general cultural, ethnic, national, political or other "identities," has no high value for a lot of young people. The impotence of politicians towards their key problems, i.e. unemployment, lack of perspective, actual social exclusion, is too obvious.

Rafik is Christian. Another of our former students, Abdallah, is a Muslim. As a Palestinian, he is working in Jerusalem at the "Middle Eastern Institute for Education and Technology." It provides computer science courses for highly gifted students of both the West Bank and Israel. As was noted during a visit, one does on principle not speak about politics and religion. The students had to do better things than to get tangled up in hopeless conflicts.

The revolutionary gesture of this generation is to say "I" to a world that knows above all several hostile "we". They have no political agenda but want only to exercise their right to lead an individual life. However much Arab or Iranian youth might

despise the secularized Western culture - all the more they appreciate the Western civilization in the material sense. That does certainly not mean schizophrenia in the awareness of the individual, but is consistent with the diverse forms of life, purposes in life, and cross-links of the modern era. You needn't like our culture and politics in order to appreciate Western science and technology. From the perspective of those young people, the West is not a self-contained system but consists of a diversified wealth of many cultures.

In the Middle East and North Africa until 2020 the number of unemployed young people will grow to one hundred million. Of the eighty million Egyptians every second person is already now younger than 25 years. There are five applicants for every job. The unemployed young Arabs have enough of collective "visions", whether they are of political or religious nature. Instead, they demand the right to build their own future. They want to be able to adopt the world as their own. This individualism differs from the old secular forces of the Arab socialism or nationalism.

They use social networks which former generations did not have. They are not yet the majority but, as the population development proves, will soon be it. Of course, the individualism of a new generation may be exaggerated, as in Europe, where it often enough turns into narcissism, and absence of emotional bonds. But in the Middle East, this menace is a topic for tomorrow. In the conflict between collectivistic and individualistic paradigms, we need a "third way" between individualism and collectivism, a conception of man as person should be emphasized. It puts personal and social responsibility, rights and duties, and participation in a relationship of reciprocity. Also in the golden rules of the "Global Ethics" it is about this reciprocity.

An activating assistance strategy in the sense of challenging educational and job-creating measures, on the other hand, could lead to a more sustainable development. From the demographic development of Orient and Occident follows the task to regard the lack of young people in Europe and the youth bulge in the Middle East and North Africa as complementary challenges. In this sense, Germany tries to integrate the refugees from the Middle East.

The cultures of the One-God-Belief have not only the task of preserving their intrinsic value. They should also empower and motivate people to contribute to the civilization of the world. If collective ethnic or religious "identities" are paramount, this means endless violence. If, however, science, technology and personal development opportunities are promoted, from it opportunities arise to develop also healing powers between different cultures and nations.

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