

The Cultures of the World and the Culture of God

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"No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundation of the religions." (Hans Kung).

The beginning of the twenty-first century took the world by surprise; war changed from border disputes and local acts of aggression to a global wave of violent terrorism in the name of religion, and a backlash from the new 'cultural imperialism'. As this imperialism took the new form of technological and economic control, this was understood by the Middle East and the Muslim world as a return of the crusaders who still lived in the memory of the people; the response was an armed conflict which fought back against the imperialist economy, technology and culture – global terrorism.

Before going deeper into this, let us define our terms. Culture is the product of any group of beings living and interacting with each other. Different elements, including language, history, tradition, art and religion shape the overall picture of any culture. All of these elements manifest themselves in the cultural story, which becomes the platform of their interaction and communion.

Christianity believes that God exists as a Triune being, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Trinity, according to Christianity, consists of these three persons who exist in three relationships and share the same essence, which is the Godhead. It has been the most difficult doctrine in the history of the Church to try to talk about the Trinity – which is three persons in one God, inseparable, indivisible and unmixed, united but at the same time distinct. If God lives in Communion, three persons in community with Himself, through the life of the Trinity, and if the Trinity is understood in terms of relationships of love, then the product must be a culture – the Culture of God.

The Culture of Community versus the Culture of Individualism

If we were created in the image of God, to be human, then we need to live in communion and communities. If God lives His culture within Himself in the Communion of the Trinity, how can we, as human beings, have access to this culture? Jesus Christ, the human-divine man, is the pontiff - the builder of the bridge between the cultures of humanity and the Culture of God. This specific man carries within him, and represents, the Culture of God. He is the first to have lived the story of God in the divine culture, and he came to us and became part of our story and our culture. In Christianity the two cultures met – not in poetry, nor in our imagination in the way that the Greek Mythologies did; the meeting point was not even an event, nor pages of a sacred book, nor an epic, but simply a man called Jesus. The person of the historic Jesus came to show us God's way of being truly human.

Only through unpacking and understanding the story of this man in his specific context, can we gain a glimpse of the Culture of God. Jesus held the human and the divine cultures in tension and dialogue, and through the power of the story he revealed the culture of his heavenly Father in the culture of his earthly family. Jesus was al-hakawati, the storyteller who embraced his culture, even wrestled with it, lived in its darkness and its light, he visited the marginalised and the poor as well as the pious and the proud; he respected his earthly culture, yet at the same time confronted its inadequacies. He endorsed his culture by living in a community and then building his own. He learned its vocabulary and used its icons, such as the shepherd and the sheep, the mustard seed, the vine and the branches, the fig tree, the sower, and many others. When Jesus took the image of the shepherd, for example, he was not sitting in front of his computer in an office in a high building in Jerusalem; he was actually sitting with the people, teaching them, looking around him and picking out these symbols and images from that which he could see. He could probably see a shepherd with his sheep in the distance – or he was eating some grapes, or sitting under a mustard tree. In today's world, who is the good shepherd, if we wanted to use a similar image to the one Christ used? In London, and indeed in many cities around the world, the good shepherd could be the good bus driver, for example, who takes people from one place to another without swearing or shouting, driving dangerously, or failing to stop!

He did all this in order to transform it by the stories he told and, more importantly, by the story he lived. Al-Hikaya – the story – even now, in the 21st century, continues to shape our cultures around the world and challenge our minds and hearts. Jesus was armed – not with a sword, but with something much sharper and more deadly – his stories. Because he used stories, he could teach without ideology or propaganda. The story freed him from any particular agenda.

Today, as we look at the ‘big picture’ of the world, we see that al-Hikaya, the story, is threatened in every culture. As Laurens Van der Post said, “If you don’t have a story to tell, you have not got a life to live.” Diversity has become a source of fear, and difference has turned into a monster. We live continuously in an ever-shrinking world, through our most famous or infamous word, globalisation. We see clearly that our advancements in transportation, communication and information technology have not helped the peoples of the world to live together. On the contrary, these advancements served the economy of the powerful and left the less advanced nations struggling to survive economically and culturally. The reaction to the ongoing phenomenon of this so-called ‘globalisation’ has been severe in many parts of the world.

Samuel Huntingdon said, in his well known work, Clash of Civilisations, “The people of different civilisations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. These differences are the product of centuries. They will not soon disappear.”

I believe that these differences will do more than “not soon disappear”, as Huntingdon said, but will harden and polarise. Consequently the culture of fear flourishes.

The cultures, which have deep roots in history and go back thousands of years, are essentially different from the cultures which have just passed their age of infancy. Such a cultural “age gap” requires a pause for deep thought before the young cultures try to influence or change the mature ones. Advancement in technology does not automatically make a culture mature; civilisation is more than a technical revolution and advanced armaments.

The West is not one culture; it consists of young and mature cultures. Europe, the mature region in the west, went through the Age of Reason, combined with the industrial and technological revolutions, which helped the West to separate the religious and the political, church and state. The US, on the other hand is a young melting pot of many different cultures. This enlightenment did not reach many cultures in the East and the boundaries there between the religious and the political have always been blurred. In Islam there is no separation between the religious institutions and political ones. It cannot conceive of a secular state.

Now I am going to look at the Middle East, the area that I come from, and draw some comparisons. Let me clarify what I mean by the Middle East: the Middle East consists of modern Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Israel and Iraq. In the Middle East, we have not gone through the awakening of rationality and reason, let alone the turning point of the surge of individualism issuing out of the French Revolution and the American War of Independence. The people in the Middle East are passionate, emotional, spiritual, exaggerating, relational (especially family), intimate, irrational, impulsive, imaginative and proud, but above all, they are the people of the story and the community. As you can see, all of these characteristics have more to do with feelings than with the brain. Definitely I am not saying that the people there are not intelligent, on the contrary, what I am seeking to emphasise here is that in our dealings, whether religious or political, with people in the Middle East, these characteristics seem to be dominant and need to be appreciated. For centuries, the only method of entertainment was story-telling, and even later, when radio and television entered every home, the story never lost its place in the life of the people. Remembering and retelling their stories, they built and established a strong sense of community. The Middle Eastern family table is a place for sharing stories and socialising long into the night.

The Christian West and the Cultures of the Middle East

Christianity flourished in the Middle East for seven centuries, before Islam took over the whole area. This success came from the fact that Christ respected and loved the culture of his day, and this love was strongly

manifested in all his teachings and in his personal story, his life. The Christian story, which swept the whole area in the early centuries, found a fertile ground because the people and cultures of the Middle East had always lived in a rich, diverse and profound heritage of stories, religiously, socially and culturally. The Qur'an came, embracing a vast number of stories from the Hebrew bible as well as the New Testament. Islam spread in the Middle East and the whole demographic and cultural scene changed dramatically. Islam entered the Middle East through war and peace, bloodshed and treaty. Since that time, the Middle East has lived in diversity and the Christians, who have become a minority, learned to keep their story alive. During more than half a millennium of the Ottoman Empire ruling the whole of the Middle East, the area lived through the darkest period in its entire history. As "the old, sick man of Europe" started to crumble, the French and British came to play the knight in shining armour and to rescue the area by colonising it in much the same way, and for similar motives, as America would appear to be doing today in the name of democracy...and oil. The result was that they divided the area with a ruler - and ruled it for almost half a century. "Divided the area with a ruler"? Yes, the Europeans very simply took a ruler and divided the Middle East in nice straight lines across their maps – regardless of history, local cultures and differing tribes. Syria lost its northern part, Iskandarun – which included Antioch, to please Turkey, and in 1948 the British allowed the Jewish people to emigrate to Palestine to create their own state. Since that time, at least six major wars devastated the area, three between the Arabs and the Israelis, one between Iraq and Iran, and two wars in the Gulf.

The collapse of communism and the Soviet Union, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the almost two decades of Lebanese civil war, and the continuing Palestinian-Israeli conflict – including two *Intifadas* or uprisings, and a continuous economic pressure through globalisation, all of these contributed to the rise of fundamentalism in the Middle East as reassertion of localisation and reassertion of their ancient cultures.

The Rise of Fundamentalism

So what do I mean by fundamentalism? Don't we all have to be fundamentalists? Shouldn't we all be in continuous touch with our fundamental beliefs?

Fundamentalism occurs when we make non-fundamental beliefs fundamental. For example, when Christians build all their faith and put all their emphasis on the literal understanding of the Bible with no attention to the culture of the Bible on one hand, and their cultures on the other, this results in the loss of the focal point of Christianity. The absolute focal point and fundamental truth and ultimate authority for Christianity is not a book, but rather the very person of Jesus. Indeed, there is a sense in which Christianity is not a religion. Karl Barth remarked "Jesus came to save us from religion". Christianity is not fundamentally either a religion, an ideology or a philosophy. Of course, Christianity is not anyTHING – it is someBODY, Christianity is essentially the person of Jesus, and it is JESUS who is fundamental to the Christian faith. St Paul said "No other foundation have you but that which has already been laid, even Jesus the Christ". It is in that sense – and that sense only – that Christians are fundamentalist about Jesus, since he is the fundamental foundation on which all other superstructures are built like the Book, or the Law or the Institution.

Moslems by their very foundation and founder are tied to the Book in its original language and the Law. When Moslems become choosy in their emphasis upon certain verses in the Qur'an, and ignore others, when political agendas blind the true faith in a merciful God, they also lose the solid ground of the purpose of Islam and become fundamentalists. Fundamentalism is the false certainty, which is the strongest enemy of faith, because the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Religions are not, and should not be, in the certainty business.

Now, such a spirituality as exists in fundamentalism (whether in Judaism, Christianity or Islam) clashes violently with the spirituality derived from and based on the culture of God as revealed in the person of Christ. Ideally, in both Christianity and Islam, the culture of God is the culture of generosity, hospitality and forgiveness. In the cultures of the world, such spirituality desperately needs to be revived. In the cultures of the world, the cultural gods engage in a fierce battle over the sovereignty over the world. The gods of our cultures, such as Coke, McDonalds, Samsung, Adidas and Nike, unite in fighting the culture of God which threatens their very existence. On the other hand, the little gods of religions, that is to say the fundamentalists, who claim to be the guardians of God, fight bitterly over the dominion of the hearts and minds of the people. The two groups of gods sometimes close deals with each other, and sometimes the titans clash.

Fundamentalism and the Powers-that-be

Fundamentalists in any religion frequently carry in their manifesto a political agenda alongside the spiritual one. Muslim fundamentalists charge the concept of *Umma* or 'nation' with political ambitions and dreams; these dreams promote the mission and every action which helps to make the world surrender beneath their banners. Actions to achieve this ambition inevitably include hostility and bloodshed. In this sense, I agree with Frank J Lechner when he notes that "a global culture, not simply local circumstances, becomes the target of fundamentalist movements."

Christian fundamentalists, however, since the establishment of Christianity in the Holy Roman Empire on 800 AD until comparatively recently have frequently confused the building of the Kingdom of God with political and imperial ambitions. While Jesus, the founder of Christianity, vehemently said to Pilate "My kingdom is not of this world". They have believed, and some still do to this day, that by their political engagement and the attempt to evangelise the world, they will assist God in sending Jesus Christ at the second coming, and in this way will hasten the coming of the Last Judgement and the coming of the end of the world.

Muslim fundamentalists however believe that their duty is to restore the Islamic sacred and glorious tradition which at one time influenced their whole world. They live in a nostalgic and sentimental dream of making the whole world Moslem, even at the cost of cancelling or eliminating all other religions and cultures. Christian fundamentalists want to run the world by taking control of the people who are the decision-makers in politics and economics. Their intention of evangelisation is to save the world and spread the Christianity they believe in, even at the cost of cancelling and eliminating all other religions and cultures.

Clearly, we can see that what is happening around the world under the description of globalisation and the role of religions is not a clash of civilisations but rather a deep clash between the cultures of the world and the culture of God.

The resurgence of localization against globalisation

Different cultures around the world face increasing pressure to hold on to their story, resisting the force of uniformity that both globalisation and fundamentalism bring with the loss of their various local stories and the loss of their cultural roots. The local culture, under such pressure, retreats to become defensive, aggressive and reactionary. This is the result of fear, which brings with it religious hard-line fundamentalism and false nationalism as opposed to a true patriotism. Religion in most cultures plays increasingly the most significant role in the life of the people, shaping their very life and values. This resurgence of religion in this sense has come as a bit of a surprise to the secular mindset of the West since the Age of Reason.

And here we face a puzzling paradox, namely that, although religion seems to be retreating in Europe, I believe spirituality is actually increasing. The spiritual hunger has not diminished but many people have lost their trust in organised and institutionalised religion, especially the Church. The technological revolution is not playing at the moment in Europe the role that enlightenment played in the past. Europe is facing not a new Age of Reason but an age of fanaticism, wrongly responding to deep spiritual hunger. All this is taking the intellectuals by surprise, since many would have supposed at the end of the twentieth century the ultimate demise of all religion in any shape or form in the name of progress and reason. We thought in the name of reason that the cat of religion had been pushed out of the back door of civilised society, only to find that the tiger of fundamentalism is breaking through the front door of our crumbling civilisation.

Rediscovering the power of the local

Local versus universal, back to square one, local culture is back to being the focus of the people outside the Western world. We are witnessing today the rediscovery of the power of the local, standing in resistance against the global, and this is further armed by the fervour of religion and frequently a fundamentalist religion with a political agenda. Economists are realising now that only through the local can they reach the global, but I believe that global culture is impossible. The technological invasion in every aspect of our lives will definitely fail to create a global culture.

The path to universality lies in the story which begins in every city, town or even village around the world – in our local communities and families, and always in the native language, there is a sense in which we might say that the story of the Tower of Babel was an abortive attempt to assert globalisation in a form of common

language. The God of diversity and community opposes this in that story. Furthermore, at Pentecost in the New Testament, we are explicitly told that the many cultures and nations in Jerusalem heard the story of Jesus told by Peter – each and every one of them – in their own language – the language of their particular culture. So it was that the mega-story did not obliterate local and diverse stories in diverse languages.

The God of the Bible is a God of diversity, and that does not fit well with globalisation and fundamentalism. We know that because of the story we repeat for two thousand years, of a man who planted his roots so deep in his own culture that he became universal. To be deeply rooted in the local, in your own culture, telling and retelling your own story is the true road to universality. If by globalisation we mean some kind of economic and cultural super melting pot – along the same lines as the merging of smaller companies into giant ones – then we had better know that we are on the road to a global disaster and disintegration – and never more so than when this is done in the name of religion. Christ taught us not only the way to explore and to understand the diversity within human culture but went much further to teach us the vocabulary as well as the very content of the culture of the diverse God.

In his life, Jesus challenged the boundaries which aggressively divided his culture. When he met the Samaritan woman on the well, he broke all the boundaries that there were to break in his culture. First of all, he broke the boundary of gender – a man talking to a strange woman in a public place; second, he broke the boundary of religion – he was a Jew, and she was a Samaritan, and both religions – although basically the same – lived in enmity because the Jews considered the Samaritans impure; thirdly, he broke the boundary of culture – as both communities lived in isolation from each other, they developed different, antagonistic cultures; fourthly, he broke the orders of the Jewish leaders not to talk to or mix with Samaritans. What he did was considered shameful for any Jew. Christ could not have cared less, and revealed in this encounter with this woman an important piece of the culture of God; this piece teaches us today that religious, cultural, social or economic boundaries are obstacles in the journey of humanity to live together.

This piece of the culture of God is beyond space or time because, as it challenged the context of Christ at that time, so does it challenge us today. It is always a risky business – and painful to cross boundaries and eliminate borders, but at the same time respecting and even celebrating diversity and difference.

The culture of God is not a global culture; it is not the culture of the book; it is not the culture of the intellect; it is not the culture of numbers; it is not the culture of collectivism or centralisation; it is not the culture of geography or history; no - it is the culture of love, which encompasses the nature of God and the relationship between God and humanity in all its diversity. So he refuses to demonise the different, the other and the diverse, but rather like the colours in the rainbow, seize diversity as enrichment and bringing about true unity without uniformity. When Jesus said “love your enemy” he was either a complete madman or he was talking about something which shatters our boundaries and lifts us to be included in the divine culture. Loving the enemy is not the manifesto of globalisation, nor the manifesto of hard-line fundamentalists in any religion. Rather it is a call and cosmic summon with the invitation to live together in diverse societies, making difference enrichment; rooting the local in the universal, it makes our world, with its cultures and languages, a mirror of the culture of God.

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