

Carry on talking, civilizations need it

IN PRINCIPLE

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Since September 11, that fateful date that really changed the world we live in, the "clash of civilizations" has left the sphere of scholarly debate to become a familiar reference.

There is no doubt that today Islam is widely perceived, in the United States and in Europe, as a powerful and menacing challenge, as a totally alien and hostile world, so that today even many of those who have never read Professor Huntington's articles and books believe in the clash of civilizations.

However, we cannot allow ourselves to be simply overwhelmed by events, and abandon intellectual debate under the pressure of dramatic contingencies. What we should do, instead, is to try to use theory and intellectual debate not as an escape from events, but as a tool to make some sense out of them.

My objections to Huntington can be summarized in four questions:

- **Who defines the values that characterize different civilizations?** In too many parts of the world definitions are not left to individuals and social groups, but are unilaterally proclaimed by non-democratic leaders, be they dictators or terrorists. Taking their claim at face value would entail a racist disrespect for millions of "producers of civilization". This is especially dramatic, true for millions of Islamic individuals, who are today culturally and politically disenfranchised by the violence of



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ary that has never been rejected as alien in China?

The fact is that values meet, cross, merge, clash. And that the clash is possible, real, frequent, but it follows neither geographic, nor cultural, nor religious fault-lines. Fault-lines exist within each culture, each nation, each religion. And even between individuals. How can we Europeans ignore that, when one of the most horrendous denials of human rights and common humanity originated, less than a century ago, in a Christian, western country? To which "civilization" do we ascribe Adolf Hitler? As a child he certainly attended a Christian church, not an Islamic *mosque*. And, for that matter, Stalin was a student in an Orthodox seminary.

But how about dialogue? Dialogue is not only possible, but it is a constant mode (together with conflict, to be sure, but not less natural than conflict) of relations between civilizations. What is central is contact and mutual influence, not separation and difference. The real world is not one of self-contained civilizations generating violent friction at their contact points. The choice is not between self-contained isolation and hostile contact, but between two modes of contact: conflict or dialogue.

This alternative defines the task of diplomacy. What is certain is that we have a choice, and there is no reason for yielding fatalistically to the worst-case scenarios. But that, unfortunately, cannot be taken for granted. Diplomacy can promote dialogue of civilizations only if it is not deaf to ethical considerations; only if it includes them within a complex

framework, which has at its core the defence of national interest, but at the same time allows legitimacy and space to ethics, both when defining goals to be pursued and when choosing and applying the necessary means. But the rationale for practicing a "diplomacy for dialogue" is not only determined by ethical choice. It is important to stress that, when working for dialogue, diplomats operate in the national interest, and thus act within their most traditional mandate and within their "core business".

Finally, international relations should be based upon the recognition of the positive value of diversity. Morally positive, since it does not limit our ethical recognition to those who are similar to us; politically positive, since it is but another way of defining democracy; but even aesthetically positive, since it is only by recognizing diversity that, as Montaigne wrote, we are enriched by the possibility of "savouring such an endless variety of shapes of human nature". This implies that without diversity there would be no art, since art is indeed about the "endless variety of shapes of human nature".

The writer, Italy's ambassador to India, challenges Samuel Huntington's *forthcoming book*, *Between Terror: Islam and Global Governance*. Essays on Ethics, Violence and International Law. Har-Anand Publications

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