

RELIGION AND RELATIONS AMONG CIVILIZATIONS, UNDER THE CONDITIONS OF GLOBALIZATION

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Rezumat. *Procesul globalizării, susținut de revoluția informațională și comunicațională, modifică toate condițiile existenței umane, extinzându-se asupra relațiilor tuturor marilor civilizații ale lumii contemporane. Apare și tendința identificării modernizării anumitor civilizații cu occidentalizarea lor, ceea ce conduce la o competitivitate sporită, dar și la conflicte mocnite. În acest joc, rolul religiei poate fi benefic – de acceptarea reciprocă și dialog – sau malefic – ca element de confruntare. Articolul pledează pentru preeminența dialogului și a cooperării între civilizații pe baza toleranței și a respectului reciproc între religii.*

Abstract. *The process of globalization boosted by the information revolution and communication modifies all the conditions of human existence. It is extended over the relationships among all the great civilizations of the contemporary world. They multiply and diversify their contacts. The tendency to identify the modernization of certain non-Western civilizations with a process of Westernization is the cause of the promotion of a spirit of competitiveness which is also conflict-ridden within the relationships among civilizations. What is the contribution of religion in the contacts among civilizations: mutual acceptance and dialogue or, on the contrary, an element of confrontation? The approach points at the conditions for the preeminence of dialogue and cooperation among civilizations through tolerance and mutual respect among religions.*

Keywords: information revolution, communication, dialogue

1. A few words about globalization

The human society evolves nowadays an intensive and comprehensive process of globalization. This process has as a background the revolution in the fields of informatics and communication. Under effects of that revolution, the World becomes, metaphoric speaking, smaller. The distances are compressed, the time flows more quickly.

The scientific research elaborates new and new ideas, transformed in more advanced technologies and techniques, in goods and services. In order to meet the avalanches of news, the education adapts itself rapidly and profoundly. As much as the people live in an information society, the education becomes a permanent activity.

The globalization changes dramatically not only the existential condition of the individuals, but those of the human communities, too. The interdependences

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between economies, between states and continents are becoming closer and closer. Even the most powerful states are no more able to develop in isolation.

The economic processes: the trade, the fluxes of capital, the circulation of goods, services and working force challenge national and regional barriers, have tendency to get global dimensions. Any significant event happened somewhere has effects in the world economy as a whole. Similar developments affects in a way or another the fields of culture, leisure, the daily life of the people.

The globalization do not recognizes frontiers, ignores not only geographical distances, but tends to uniform ideas, opinions, tests, behaviors. This kind of cumulative effects are extended everywhere in human civilizations, sooner or later.

2. A few words about civilization

What are them? They cannot be found on political-administrative maps, which represent the world-states, or on those which show the presence of ethnical or linguistic entities: nations, minorities, groups of population; they are not mentioned in the maps prepared by geopolitics, according to power relationship among states, groups of states, regions. In spite of that, the civilizations are real, and their presence and influence of the peoples' life, as well as in the international relations cannot be denied or ignored.

The civilizations are human conglomerates, usually large ones, which are a natural result of affinities among people – namely affinities on language, ethnicity, historical togetherness, way of life and, fist of all, of religion. I say “first of all” because religion, in its capacity of belief, as well as institution, plays a role under many aspects decisive in grouping people, both as feeling and belonging, in certain civilizations.

The civilizations are human communities consistent enough to have individuality, profile, distinctive features; on the other hand, they have enough elasticity in order to avoid an exaggerated rigidity of the population. Essentially, they are defined culturally – the religion, language, ethnicity, way of life are, all, cultural phenomena. In the same time, their existence, features and manifestations have some other determinatives related, mainly, to their level of economic development, natural resources, geographic location, with its geopolitical potentialities.

In the scientific literature, there are different opinions about civilizations existing in today World. But according to a view point largely accepted, there are the following civilizations: the Western, Islamic, Orthodox, Sinic, Japanese, Hindu, Latin-American, African.¹

¹Samuel P. Huntington, *Ciocnirea civilizațiilor și refacerea Ordinii Mondiale*, Antet, 1998, pp. 63-67.

3. Contemporary civilizations: mutual relations

3.1. Factors able to stimulate competition and conflict

3.1.1. The dominant position of the West in the World and in the World's affairs. With the exception of Japan, Republic of Korea, Singapore and Taiwan, all countries from the leading echelon of economic development belong to the Western Civilization and to Romano-Catholic and Protestant Christianity. The financial power (the core of it), the most advanced scientific and technological potentialities, the majority of transnational corporations (the main promoters of globalization) belong, also, to the West, which has as a state-nucleus the United States of America.. The West has the leadership of the main international financial institutions – the World Bank and the International Monetary Fond; it is best situated into the G8 and exerts the most powerful influence on the World Trade Organization.

In the Security Council of the United Nations, the West has 3 from 5 permanent seats, capacity that implies the veto right. The West disposes of the military supremacy in the World, first of all due to the United States, has the key-position into the only political-military alliance existing in the World, the most powerful in history – the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Some of the developed countries: Japan, Republic of Korea, Israel, Taiwan, and Australia have treaties or other security accords with the United States, under conditions when no country from other civilizations, excepting the Eastern-Central European countries, members of NATO, and benefit of security guarantees.

This position of power puts the relations among the Western Civilization and other civilizations on the ground of competition, hostility and conflict, of course, in different degrees. To this reality have to add the colonial past, as well as the West's tentative to maintain - sometimes - to regain, its positions in the zones rich in resources of energy: oil and natural gas.

3.1.2. The universality and missionary character of the Western Civilization, which considers that the own culture, its values, the institutions created in the name of those values are superior to the culture, values and institutions proper to other civilizations, and must be spread all over the World and adopted by peoples belonging to other civilizations. A particular aspect of that universalism it is the opinion largely circulated in the Western World according to which any modernization of the societies from other civilizations requires Westernization. In other words, the modernization would mean assimilation by other civilizations of culture, values and institutions existing in the Western Civilization.

3.1.3. The position of power of the Western Civilization, although huge,

starts to be eroded. The West is in a relative decline demographically. The rhythm of economic development of China, India, Nigeria, Brazil, Argentina, the natural resources, including of the energy, concentrated mainly in zones where are other civilizations, as well as the accumulation in such zones of great financial resources, the strong affirmation of Russia in the international affairs, the advance of many emergent economies in the field of IT, the growth of military capabilities of some countries – a few of them states-nucleus of certain civilizations, represent increasing challenges to the dominant position of the West and of the Western Civilization.

3.1.4. In the same time, the advances of non-Western countries and zones constitutes an affirmation of confidence in the culture, values and the institutions proper to their own civilizations and a rejection of the pretence that any modernization would mean Westernization. To such significant developments is added the authoritative voice of Japan, a country which became one of the most powerful economy and a leading technological force in the World, without annulling its cultural specificity that makes it a distinctive type of civilization. It is extremely interesting in this respect the fact that some countries from certain non-Western civilization adopt forms of market economy, Western methods of management, as well as political institutions like multi-party system, parliamentary democracy, etc., without denying the cultural premises of their own civilization, by the contrary, strengthening the bases of that civilization. This is the case with some Islamic societies – for example, countries like Egypt, Indonesia, Turkey, and Pakistan.

3.1.5. The spirit of confrontation and conflict is the most obvious in the relations between the Islam and the West. I have in mind the Islam both as religion and as civilization, designated by the same concept. The conflictive character of the relations between the two civilizations has historical roots. The Arab-Islamic domination extended from the beginning of the 7th century to the middle of the 8th century; a Muslim order was imposed in the North Africa, Iberian Peninsula, the Middle East, Persia and the Northern India.

Over the following two centuries, the lines of division between Islamic World and Christianity remained stable. In 9-11th centuries, the Christians took the control of the Western part of the Mediterranean Sea, Sicily, and partially of the Iberian Peninsula. In the 1095, the Crusades started.

After that, the Muslim Turks entered in the scene. In 1453 they conquered Constantinople, then in 1459 and once again in 1653 assailed Vienna.

The failure to occupy the Capital of the Hapsburg Empire, marked the beginning of the decline of the Muslim power in Europe. In the history of relations between the Islam and the West followed the colonialism, the

competition on the immense deposits of oil and gas, located mostly in zones with Muslim people, the competition won usually by the Western countries. Of course, the Islam has conflicting relations with other civilizations, but those with the Western World are by far the most profound.

The resurrection of Islam in the last half of century, the Arab-Israel wars, the lack of a just and lasting solution of the conflict between Palestinian and Israel, the constant support given by the United States to Israel during the clashes with the Arab World exacerbated to a maxim the spirit of competition and tensions. Inside of Islam appeared some fundamentalist orientation and terrorist organizations. The September 11th, 2001, the Afghanistan, the Iraq are, all, expressions of an escalation of hostility, tensions and conflicts between Islamic World and the West

3.1.6. The relations among civilizations are a part of the general condition of the international security. After cease of the Cold War, some new treats against peace and security appeared. Some of the authors consider that the zones where these new treats represent the highest risks and dangers are just the lines (faults) of meeting of states belonging to different civilizations¹. Even that such opinions could be, in a way, exaggerated, they have their reason and deserve, according to my view, all attention. With mention that a component linked to civilization of the international conflicts must be considered in the context of the balance of forces in the World's affairs, first of all, between the great powers.

3.2. Some factors which could and should contribute to understanding and cooperation among civilizations

This kind of factors, generating tensions in relations between civilizations could and should be counter-balanced by some conditions which, as an effect of globalization, put to the whole World a number of problems requiring united efforts, despite of any differences and controversies. I will enumerate in the following lines a few of such conditions.

-The global warming, which affects negatively the life on the Planet and puts under question mark the prospects of Man as specie;

-The extraordinary extension of the international organized crime – the consume of drugs, traffic of human beings, exploitation and sexual aggression of children, etc.;

-The maintenance of the underdevelopment, of the poverty, including of the extreme poverty, which denies to over one billion on human beings the most elementary conditions of life;

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 376.

-The persistency and spreading of some endemic diseases, the high degree of morbidity and mortality among some categories of population, especially among children and teen-agers;

-The presence and spreading of violence in the World, the existence of a large number of foci of tension and conflict, the insecurity, the fear of war, of aggression under which live many peoples, where the proliferation of the arms of mass destruction takes place and the sell of armaments keeps a top position on a list of successful business;

-The weakness on the United Nations, the only Organization with universal vocation dedicated to international peace and security.

These are only a few challenges, which require wisdom and reason on behalf of anybody, and in face of which any motive of discordance and dispute become insignificant. Indeed, when we take into consideration the grave problems facing Humanity and people from everywhere, how senseless appear to be divergences about the superiority of a civilization or another, how insignificant are any controversy on question if the modernization implies or not Westernization, how futile are pretences about particular and universal values, how narrow are the theses about the special status and rights of some civilizations.

As a matter of fact, the Destiny of the Man as specie transcends the condition of any type of civilization and refers to the Human Civilization as such.

4. Religion and globalization

In the equilibrium, I should say, delicate and fragile, full of traps, of risks and treats, existing between conflictive and cooperative factors which act in relations among civilizations under impact of globalization, the religion has reserved a fundamental role. This role derives first of all from the responsibility of religion as the main integrative binder which groups people in great civilizations. On the other hand, the same fundamental role of religion is the result of its special vocation to unite the World. I will refer to that vocation later on.

4.1. Some people saw the path to surpass the troubles provoked by the differences between civilizations in modernization, in the unification, even the uniformity brought elsewhere in the World by modern production and consumption of material and spiritual goods, with their managerial and organizational ingredients. But it was proved that the modernization is compatible with different types of civilizations, that its requirements are, sooner or later, satisfied by those civilizations which, in the process of modernization, not only preserve, but consolidate their specific features. In other words, historically, it is proved that what the modernization brings as a common substance for all types of civilizations, including under conditions of globalization, do not annul their

particularities, which give their specific, color and flavor.

Under such conditions, the desire to be considered unique, the pretences referring to the universal character of some civilizations eliminate the beneficial effects of the extension of modernization could have for relations among different civilizations, are in contradiction with necessity of surpassing the conflictive mood, which exists as a background of those relations.

4.2. Some others, very numerous, consider that the uniting factor of the World and, as effect, a real solution for the tensions between civilizations, is the spreading at a global level of the democratic values and institutions, born and active on the ground of the Western Civilization. No doubt, the affirmation of the human rights, the state of law, political pluralism, free elections, all of them democratic freedoms, extended in adequate institutions, are historical achievements of the Mankind and enjoy of a large recognition all over the World. But they, especially in the formulae known in the West, are not the only political values and institutions appreciated by peoples – fact that contests any pretence to universality. In addition, I should mention that in the last half of century, two really astonishing facts happened.

The first: some states with Muslim population, among them being Turkey, Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, adopted certain forms of political pluralism, parliamentary democracy, admitted the affirmation of a mass media relatively independent. Yet more it was proved that such reforms do not weaken, but strengthen the position of Islam in those countries. This happened, among others, because, under condition of even limited democratization of the public life, an Islamic civic society appears which, along side with the competition between political parties, can exert a great influence upon election competition. The fact has a special significance: it proves that the assimilation in the Islamic World of some values and institutions proper to the Western Civilization do not mean an extension of presence and influence of that civilization instead of those of Islam; by the contrary, such developments could consolidate the position of the latter.

The second: the strongest criticism in mass media of the United States and of the Coalition led by Washington, for waging war against Iraq, after the invasion of Kuwait by Baghdad, happened in the Islamic countries where the press enjoys of some freedom of expression. Indeed, after the Iraq occupied Kuwait in 1990, the Arab World, the Muslim countries in general, disapproved the action of the Saddam Hussein regime. But the question was viewed as an affair among two Islamic states. After the intervention of some Western countries in the conflict, the disapproval was directed against the West. As a matter of fact, the Gulf War is considered by many to be the second war among civilizations, after that from Afghanistan, provoked by the Soviet intervention in that country, ten years earlier.

So, the evolutions generated by modernization and by the extension of some democratic values and institutions alter neither the nature of some non-Western civilizations nor the relations between civilizations. Just on that background the religion enters on scene. Why?

4.3. Firstly, because the religiosity is a kind of natural mood of the Mankind. Of course, people adhere to different beliefs, belong to different religious institutions. But they, in a great majority, are *believers*.

Thus, according to the statistics, 2.1 billion of people (33% from the World population) belong to Christianity, 1.5 billion (21%) adhere to Islam, 900 million (14%) are adepts of Hinduism, cca. 500 million (6%) belong to Buddhism, and cca. 1 billion (16%) declare themselves non-believers. This last billion comprises people spread up to the all corners of the World. I mention this aspect because there are not peoples, ethnical or linguistic minorities etc., which are nor religious, in their entirety.

4.4. Secondly, because the religion and the religious institutions enjoy of the highest degree of trust on behalf of population, elsewhere in the World.

I do not refer to the elites, to some groups of power, which, of course, can exert a great influence in determination of the character of relations between civilizations; I have in mind the huge majority of the people who forms the nations and live into the states belonging to different civilizations.

4.5. Thirdly, because the religion satisfies the human spirituality in its integrality, namely both concerning knowledge and psychological aspects of the consciousness, the latter being so important in configuration of the moral profile and behaviour of the people.

There are truths which can be discovered and appropriate by people only by belief. On the other hand, there are rules concerning relations among people which can be very well assimilated due to religion.

Under such conditions, would be hazardous to count upon what the belief, the religion could bring in surpassing the frictions among civilizations, very often created and fed artificially, in order to hide truth and economic and political interests, without nothing noble and generous?

4.6. This kind of integrative potentialities of religion in the relations among civilizations are not fulfilled spontaneously. Their realization requires the conviction of the responsible people and bodies that the goal of surpassing of the asperities among civilizations deserves to be appropriate, assumed and fulfilled.

In practical terms, it means the recognition of the fundamental fact that the right of every human being to be different from others represents not only the

quintessence of the political democracy, but must be applied equally to the religious freedom, as well as to the option in favor of one or other civilizations.

On such a premise, a genuine dialogue among cultures, among religions can take place, dialogue which presumes accommodation and mutual respect, the disposition not to talk to others, but to talk *with others*. Such a dialogue cannot be promoted from the position: "*I'm Right, You're Wrong – Go to Hell*" – I quote the title of a known pamphlet, published a few years ago¹.

More than that such a dialogue presumes the renunciation to any pretence of exclusive truth, the recognition of the fact that others can have their truth, too. It could be remind in this respect that the studies of cultural anthropology do not find any kind of hierarchy among the ideas adopted by people who adhere to one or other religious beliefs.

For example, cannot be sustained that the sum of ideas which give the substance to Shinto would be superior or inferior to that proper to the Buddhist religion.

The Japanese as a people, as a representative of one specific type of civilization, gave a clear answer to that false problem – I would say, to that false dilemma. Thus, according to official statistics, Japan is the country where the number of believers is much bigger than that of the citizens. In concrete terms, in 1990, at a population of 123 million, 113 million declared themselves adepts of Shinto, 94 million were adherents of Buddhism, 1.4 million embraced the Christianity, and other 11 million identified with other religions or were non-religious². It is not a strange situation, but a normality of a society in which the majority of people consider themselves adepts both of Shinto and of Buddhism; for those people it is normally to pray in both Shinto and Buddhist shrines.

These are reasons for the hope that the aptitude of people to believe, their religious affiliation can be, should be not factors of discordance and clashes among the great civilizations of the World, but factors of mutual tolerance and concordance among those civilizations.

This is why must be welcomed that important religious personalities are in favor of dialogue, as well as the fact that manifestation of ecumenism are not isolated, with the hope that the dialogue and the ecumenical spirit will not be shadowed by any kind of fundamentality, of missionary zeal and proselytism.

¹Bernard Lewis, *I'm Right, You're Wrong – Go to Hell*, May 2003, Atlantic Monthly.

²Constantin Vlad, *Japonia. Introducere în istorie, cultură, civilizație*, Editura Fundației România de Măine, București, 1998, p. 144.

I would like to stress that the endeavors of religions and of religious institutions toward dialogue and understanding met with recent actions taken by international community. I have in mind the initiative of the United

Nations are to proclaim 2001 as a Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, as well as the tentative of the UN to promote a genuine alliance of the great civilizations of the World.

May be, we can see in such attitudes a sign of time: the necessity to stop the dangerous course toward clashes among civilizations, and to replace it with a spirit and practice of mutual understanding and cooperation.