

The Role of Religious Education in the Development of "Universal Responsibility"

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Abstract

This paper highlights two major issues of the time: Clash of civilizations as suggested by Samuel Huntington and the problem with secularization. The author thinks that both issues are related to (ancient) religions. To resolve these issues, the paper suggests the adoption of "Universal Responsibility" brought forward by Dalai Lama and discusses the role of religious education to have it installed.

Keywords

Clash of civilizations, secularization, desecularization, universal responsibility, religious education.

Background

At the turn of the new millennium, two major issues seem to have a great impact to our way of living: the clash of civilizations and secularization. The former thesis first appeared in a lecture by Samuel Huntington at the American Enterprise Institute in 1992. He wrote later a paper for *Foreign Affairs* in 1993 (Huntington, 1993) to elaborate and further expanded it to a book: *The Clash of Civilizations* (Huntington, 1996) in 1996. In these writings, Huntington named the new source of conflicts in the post-Cold War period: "Clash of Civilizations." With the fast advancement of science and technology, secularization has become commonplace since the mid of the twentieth century. This continuing process has a side-effect that has unintentionally encouraged people not to work out their meaning of life, but to live for personal fame and wealth accumulation. An obvious consequence is that there are less and less people who really care about the development of a civilization and are capable to provide a cross-cultural insight on contemporary issues. So secularization is a process that will further worsen the case of clash of civilizations, as predicted by Huntington.

The main arguments that Huntington maintained why civilizations will clash are as follows (Huntington, 1993):

1. "... (The) differences among civilizations are not only real; they are basic." The formulation of civilization is a precipitation process that takes thousands of years to shape and develop its unique features, which appear as her specific language(s), tradition(s), and

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religion(s). These differences are fundamental and independent of all sorts of political ideologies and regimes. In history, we have seen many cases that these differences among civilizations have resulted in different ethical values and sometime led to terrifying consequences, like genocides.

2. "... (The) world is becoming a smaller place." Globalization that started nearing the end of the twentieth century has mobilized people from all civilizations to emigrate, meet and work together. The increasing interaction among people from different civilizations enhance their civilization-consciousness that in turn amplify the existing civilization differences.
3. "... (The) processes of economic modernization and social change throughout the world are separating people from longstanding local identities." Due to ignorance of other cultures and civilizations, the increased interaction between people of different civilizations has inevitably created unnecessary confrontation. This has, in turn, driven people of the same civilization to get together for better protection and support from any potential discrimination and abuse. Religion becomes a natural protector for these people. This is what George Weigel has remarked: "Unsecularization of the world is one of the dominant social factors of life in the late twentieth century."
4. "... (The) growth of civilization-consciousness is enhanced by the dual role of the West." The dual role refers to the fact that elites of non-Western societies were usually trained in the West. Yet, these elites, after returning to their homelands, have a strong desire, will power, and resources "to shape their world in non-Western ways."
5. "... (Cultural) characteristics and differences are less mutable and hence less easily compromised and resolved than political and economic ones." This is due to the fact that civilization is an identity that one cannot change, unlike classes and ideologies. Even when one claims to the public that he/she is "half-Catholic and half-Muslim," he/she is never viewed and treated in such a way.
6. "... (Economic) regionalism is increasing." People of common culture are attracted to live and work together: We have Greater China centred around the People's Republic of China, the Economic Cooperation Organization of non-Arab Muslim countries, European Community that brings together the European Christian countries, etc. These regional forces will act for their best benefits and will in effect harm the interest other parties unknowingly. Again, conflicts will result.

Huntington analyzed that the conflicts will be realized as "fault line wars." These are "communal conflicts between states or groups from different civilizations... (They) are conflicts that have become violent. Such wars may occur between state, between nongovernmental groups, and between states and nongovernmental groups." (Huntington 1996) He further noted his reader that these wars broke out in the early 1990s and have

caused death of 50,000 in the Philippines, 50,000 – 100,000 in Sri Lanka, 50,000 – 200,000 in Bosnia, 200,000 in Timor, ..., etc. Apart from the 9/11 incident, the war in Afghanistan, the 2002 Bali bombings, the war in Iraq in 2003, the 2005 London bombings, and the continuing Israel-Palestine conflict are considered as strong evidence showing that Huntington is right in his theory.

In the eyes of Huntington and many other researchers, clash of civilizations is an issue concerning pluralism. Dieter Senghaas (1998) cautioned in his little book, *The Clash within Civilizations*, and questioned about whether “is it now still seriously possible to take up classical Chinese philosophy, that is the philosophy of the time that Karl Jaspers referred to as the axis period (sixth to second century BC), as a source of inspiration or even as a practical guide (to resolve these global issues)?” This is an interesting remark as China in her political history showed only signs of narrowing philosophical discourse in the country. Thus China may not be an appropriate example to follow. The point that Senghaas sees is that although China was selective in her philosophical discourse, she was seemingly tolerant when *ren* (仁, benevolence) is kept at the lips of the ruling parties and scholars. He sees *ren* could be something in common to all Chinese traditions that has helped weaving the diverse cultures of ancient China together. In the same token, Senghaas has hoped this would inspire us to find a way to uphold pluralism and maintain peace of the world.

Pluralism may be one of the major factors that cause the clash of civilizations. Nevertheless, Peter Berger once said (1999): “modernity, for fully understandable reasons, undermines all the old certainties; uncertainty is a condition that many people find very hard to bear; therefore, any movement (not only a religious one) that promises to provide or to renew certainty has a ready market.” Hence, the movement of desecularization can be another prime cause among all.

The Movement of Desecularization

In the little book edited by Peter Berger, he collected a number of papers written by him and other authors that discussed extensively the issue of desecularization throughout the world. Berger wrote in the foreword of the book, “(John Kizer, president of the Greve Foundation, said,) ‘The news was filled reports of the impact of religion on politics: the evangelical upsurge in Latin America, Muslim-Christian rivalries in Africa, disputes between Arabs and Israelis, secularist-religious struggles in Turkey, Muslim fundamentalists fighting a secularizing military in Algeria, Hindu fundamentalists beating the Congress Party in India.’” Now in the year of 2009, nothing much, if any, seems to have changed.

Berger wrote that we are wrong with the assumption that “we live in a secularized world,” and he challenged the claim that modernization will necessarily lead to the decline of religion. He remarked that religions never stop living in the lives of individuals. Religions have taken new institutional forms to adapt to these changes. He advised his readers to note the difference between secularization on the societal level and secularization on the level of individual consciousness. People could “reject modern ideas and values in their lives to create *religious subcultures* designed to keep out the influences of the outside society.”

Secularization theory, according to Berger, thus has failed or falsified since religious communities have survived and even flourished by *not* trying to adapt themselves as predicted in the process of secularization. The forming of religious subcultures is the answer of those (surviving) religious communities to secularization. Inevitably, these religious communities are often tagged as conservatives by the West. As we can see, vigorous upsurges are not restricted to Islam, or Judaism. There are revival movements in Hinduism, Buddhism, or even in smaller communities such as Shinto and Sikhism as well. Together they have demonstrated to the world that desecularization can be as important as secularization in the modern world. These upsurges are often termed as “fundamentalism” both in the academic circle and in the media.

Nevertheless, these movements are not all the same. The differences can be big even within the movement. For example, Sunni and Shiite are two contending groups in Islam. Indonesia is the most populous Muslim country but she is pro-democracy and pro-pluralism, unlike other Muslim “fundamentalism.” Evangelical upsurge is another significant movement. It has converted huge numbers of people in East Asia, including communist China, and in Latin America. The conversion has also brought to the people a cultural transformation that changes their work attitudes, and the social ethos.

These movements shall have a great impact on (i) international politics; (ii) war and peace; (iii) economic development; and (iv) human rights and social justice, according to Berger, and as predicted by Huntington.

The Validity of Huntington’s Theory

To test whether Huntington’s theory is valid, Giacomo Chiozza (2002) raised a total of 12 hypotheses that covered tests on fault line wars, intercivilizational dyads and border contiguity, intercivilizational dyads and domestic regime type, modernization and the clash of civilizations. He defined a number of control variables like distance between countries, military capabilities and power. To formulate his hypothesis, he used data collected during and after the Cold War period from 1946 – 1997. Three conclusions were drawn at the end of

his paper: (1) international dyads will not necessarily find themselves in confrontations and conflicts; (2) there is no evidence that disconforming patterns have been developed after the post-Cold War era; and (3) the conditional effects like border contiguity and regime type, which are shaped by the civilization, are not sufficient factors to generate religious, ethnic, and cultural conflicts.

In another analysis by Johnathan Fox (2002), Huntington's argument about clash of civilizations is again rejected. Though both authors tried their best to quantify the problem involved, both arguments are not without faults. For Chiozza, the model he employed is an over-simplification, especially when he defined "modernization," "balance of military forces," and "major powers." These factors are considered very critical in Huntington's theory. When they are not properly defined, an unreliable conclusion will arise. For Fox, he focused his study on ethnic minorities, whereas in the macro scale of study, the clash of civilizations by Huntington refers not to the uprising of the ethnic minorities alone. So, the world is still split into two concerning the validity of Huntington's theory.

Reaction to Clash of Civilizations

The reaction to Huntington's theory varied. Some go for it and some go against it. Some take it seriously, and some do not.

The 9/11 incident in 2001 is often considered a typical example of Huntington's theory. Many people have put the blames on Muslims, and developed an incorrect perception that a world without Islam (or fundamentalist Islam) will put the world back on the right track. The war between USA and Taliban, and that between USA and Iraq were answers of former USA president to restore the world order. Graham E. Fuller (2008) has made an unsuccessful attempt to rectify this misconception. He described a fictitious world without Muslims and concluded that terrorist attacks will persist in such a world. He used a statistics of terrorist attacks in 2006 in Europe from Europol to support his argument. He made a note that among the 498 terrorist attacks, only one was carried out by Islamists and thus terrorist attacks could well still persist in a world without Muslims. His account is not persuasive at all as we all know that the West after the 9/11 incident has spent an enormous effort to confine any possible terror plots. This may just be an evidence of the effectiveness of their intelligent agencies. No matter what, the fact remaining is that we have no other option but to live with Muslims, whose number is expected to reach 1.66 billion in 2009 versus the world population of 6.77 billion.²

² Figures are collected from CIA Factbook and US Census Bureau.

William J. Dobson (2006) is an author who sees no major issue in the clash of civilizations. In an earlier report, he told his readers that the 9/11 incident in 2001 did not worsen the world economy, or at least, it did not worsen the case for USA. USA's monthly exports have risen from \$60 billions in 2001 to more than \$75 billion in 2005. More aliens were naturalized in 2005 than in 1998. So, the so-called clash of civilizations had only little effect to alter the trend of globalization, modernization, and anti-Americanism. This is quite an interesting observation. Although the fault line wars have started as predicted, the general situation has not been worsened. But is there any hidden risk that we do not aware of so far?

The conflict and confrontation of people from different cultures are unavoidable in the process of globalization. We are all working to find a general solution that helps preventing further bloodsheds. Mikhail Epstein (2009) proposed a concept of transculture "as a model of cultural development that differs from both leveling globalism and isolating pluralism... The transcultural perspective opens a possibility for globalization not as homogenization but, rather, as further differentiation of cultures and their 'dissemination' into transcultural individuals, liberating themselves from their dependence from their native cultures." This is something easier said than done because it lacks a theme of what to differentiate in order to liberate. The only chance that Epstein's proposal would succeed is through a cooperative global agenda to continually educate people since they are young to remove this natural dependence of native cultures.

A good number of papers of these natures can be found since Huntington proposed his theory. However, there is another work worth mentioning before our discussion. This work is not something about Huntington's theory, but about the approach and scope of sociology. N. J. Demerath III (2002) explained why many sociologists chose to ignore religion and the potential problems thus have induced. He believed that "both societies and intellectual disciplines may be better reflected in their sinners than in their saints. While a good number of my sins may represent purely personal depravities, others mirror the development of sociology as a whole." He has spent 15 years to study the different patterns of religion, violence, and politics of countries like Brazil, Guatemala, Poland, Northern Ireland, Sweden, Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia, Israel, India, Thailand, Japan, and China (results found in his book (Demerath, 2001), *Cross the Gods: World Religions and Worldly Politics*.) In his conclusion, he wrote that "many social scientists tend to... regard religion itself... as irrelevant, anachronistic, and incomprehensible." This attitude has prevented sociologists from considering religion as a cause of violence, nor an issue in ethnicity. "Neglecting religion's relation to politics and omitting religion per se from the causes of violence would seem almost perversely myopic to the citizens of most of the countries I have studied, not to mention those still numb in the aftermath of this past September 11th."

Having all these discussed, we now see a need of proper religious education in place to prevent any future clash of civilizations. An immediate question will follow: “What will be the theme of the religious education?” The following two sections try to draw up an answer: to develop of a new global consciousness. This new global consciousness must be something inherent to every culture or religion, and must also be one of their core teachings. Amongst all, I picked the concept of “Universal Responsibility.”

What is Universal Responsibility?

“Universal Responsibility” is a proposition raised by Dalai Lama the XIV in late 90s of the twentieth century. It is a repackage of the ages old concept of love and compassion borrowed from Buddhism. Dalai Lama did not bother to give a precise definition of it. Instead, in his own words from his book, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (Dalai Lama, 2001), universal responsibility is described as such:

“I am convinced that it is essential that we cultivate a sense of what I call Universal Responsibility. This may not be an exact translation of the Tibetan term I have in mind, *chi sem*, which means, literally, universal (chi) consciousness (sem). Although the notion of responsibility is implied rather than explicit in the Tibetan, it is definitely there...

To develop a sense of universal responsibility of the universal dimension of our every act and of the equal right of all others to happiness and not to suffer is to develop an attitude of mind whereby, when we see an opportunity to benefit others, we will take it in preference to merely looking after our own narrow interests. Of course we care about what is beyond our scope – we accept it as part of nature and concern ourselves with doing what we can.”

So, universal responsibility can be viewed as an extension of his earlier advocate of ahimsa movement (non-violence movement) in his effort to maintain the traditions of Tibetan cultures and religions since he was exiled to India. We can safely deduce now Dalai Lama eyes not only on the Land of Snow Mountains, but he is more ambitious to provide the world a global perspective to solve contemporary social issues. In this context, he is at least trying to help the world to find a viable solution to stop the increasing cultural confrontation around the globe, if he is not trying to find the solution himself.

According to Dalai Lama, universal responsibility is a must for every individual because (1) human beings are social animals. “If the community suffers, then each member of the

community suffers.” (Dalai Lama, 2006b) and (2) globalization has practically removed national boundaries, thus making the very concept of “We” and “They” out of date. All human beings on earth are now interdependent, rich or poor, stupid or clever.

Dalai Lama believes that universal responsibility is an obligation that would arise spontaneously with the cultivation of compassion in every human’s heart. He finds that this understanding is connected with the biological nature of a human being. “I’m always telling people. I think today’s sense of love, compassion and affection to each other is learned within a few moments just after birth... So long as my mother takes care of me and gives me milk, I feel tremendously secure. I feel happy, don’t I?” Therefore, this biological instinct will be the scientific basis that makes universal responsibility something feasible to implement, regardless of the underlying ideologies and beliefs.

In his recent book (Dalai Lama 2006a), he wrote, “The premise behind universal responsibility is the simple fact that we all want the same thing. Every being wants happiness and does not want suffering. If we do not respect this fact, there will be more and more suffering on this planet. If we adopt a self-centered approach to life and constantly try to use others for our own self-interest, we may gain temporary benefits, but in the long run both personal happiness and world peace will be completely out of question... A spiritual approach may not provide an overnight solution to all the political problems caused by our present self-centered approach, but in the long run it will address the very basis of the problems that we face today, removing them at the root.”

The Role of Religious Education

The education system is a bit different between that of Macau and Hong Kong. Yet the subjects to learn and the number of years of studies are more or less the same. More importantly, both systems have an implicit but common objective: to prepare our youths to enter universities. As a teacher for a good number of years, I know the problems that the education would result if the system is an exam-oriented one. Most of the students that have completed their studies would become a walking dictionary, at their best, or a youth detached from the reality, to the worst. The current education system simply has no room to allow our youths to learn about the basis of human values. The knowing and appreciation of fundamental human values are critical to the construction of a world without sorrow.

Some of my colleagues often complained that the education system discourages students to develop a critical mind. Many a time they think that with a critical mind, our students will spontaneously cultivate a proper ethical view. Nevertheless, judging from recent collapse of

financial system and happening concerning the clashes of civilizations, this belief is questionable.

Take a look of the traditional syllabus of current college studies. For science major, students need to take courses like mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, geography, English, and Chinese. For business major, students need to take courses like mathematics, economics, accounting, history, literature, English, and Chinese. Obviously, all of the above courses do not involve anything that concerns the contemporary issues, not to mention anything that will help the development of a critical mind.

Knowing the shortcomings of current syllabus, the education reform to take place in Hong Kong has determined to add liberal studies, hoping to improve the students' awareness and to generate a genuine concern of the world they are living in. Nevertheless, as pointed out by other authors, like Dermarath III, the inclusion of liberal studies does not necessarily help the students to develop a primary concern of human values. Among all, the only discipline that can help is religious education. Religious education should never be regarded as something restricted to schools with religious background only. It may focus on a single religion to coincide with the educational ideology of corresponding school, or can have a more general discussion on world religions to broaden the mind of the students. When students are granted a chance to learn about the diversity of ethical values of different cultures, they will at least know the root causes of clash of civilizations. Some may even be able to develop eventually their ways to accommodate these differences. Religious education thus plays a primary and important role to prepare the world to enter into a "Century of Dialogues" to prevent any future clash of civilizations.

In a modern society, secularization has led to the decline of religion to a certain extent. Most of the people in a "civilized" society are brought up to live in a world without faith or religion. More importantly, they are brought up intentionally to ignore the contribution of religion that has been made in history. It is not exaggerating to tell that ancient religions were in fact mothers of all civilizations. Nowhere on earth can one find a civilization that does not have a connection with a religion in history. So, we may safely claim here that a proper religious education plan will be of great help to allow people to learn about and appreciate the essence of each and every tradition. In such a way, they will learn why they should respect each other, based on the common foundation of love and compassion, as suggested by Dalai Lama.

Religious education will no doubt help in the promotion of Universal Responsibility. It will help reminding people that irrespective of our colors, faith, background, and history, we, the human beings on earth, are nothing but same life forms that share a common desire to be

happy and to be free from suffering. This is the basis of human values. So, when religious education is properly organized, it will serve as a strong foundation to develop and cultivate universal responsibility for every human being.

Conclusion

This paper is a preliminary work aiming to arouse a general concern of humanity, and its foundation in education. The twentieth century is a century of bloodsheds and wars. Our grandfathers have paid enormously to learn the lesson of peace, and helped laying out a common concern of humanity. However, the fast advancing process of secularization has driven us away from tackling with the root causes of clash of civilizations. We are now at a turning point. Desecularization to one extreme will result in fundamentalism, which is something that we should reject. On the other hand, desecularization does help us to move back onto a right track that is promising to remove all known causes of bloodsheds and wars. Religious education is the beginning of this long journey.

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