



The Dialogue of Civilizations: The Ricci Model

Thomas Menamparampil

Archbishop (Emeritus) of Guwahati, Assam

Abstract: Against the prevailing mode of despair and angst, the author hopes for a better world through dialogue and sharing of vision and ideas. "Paradoxically, their (religious believers') other-worldly gaze brought this-worldly success" (Smart 1999:17). Matteo Ricci invited his dialogue partners to look beyond immediate gift-giving and study of Euclid to the study of values of his civilization, and spiritual energies from which they were derived, and relating them to the Chinese worldviews and values. Thus, intelligently relating the immediate and the practical with the aesthetical, ethical and the spiritual of two Great Civilizations he explored the more complete identity of the human being opening doors to immense possibilities. The Ricci way of sharing the assets of Great Civilizations and even of Little Cultures is the only way forward for the human family today.

Keywords: dialogue, civilizations, cultural heritage, communion, Matteo Ricci.

1. From Wars of Civilizations to Dialogue of Civilizations

"Never in this world will hatred cease by hatred...hatred is ceased by love" (The Buddha).

It was only a few decades ago that the great Historian

Arnold Toynbee expressed his profound concern for the future of humanity. He said “Mankind is surely going to destroy itself unless it succeeds in growing together into something like a human family. For this, we must become familiar with each other (Toynbee 1995:10). “We shall have to do more” he said, “than understand each other’s cultural heritages, and even more than appreciate them. We shall have to value them and love them” (Ibid 47). This challenge has assumed greater significance in our times. Aggressiveness has grown. Mutual understanding has diminished, despite the expansion of communications.

Soon after the terrorist attack on New York’s World Trade Centre (11/9/01), many cried that the much-debated ‘Wars of Civilizations’ had just begun. The Gulf War, they said, was only an early warning. Human experience has shown down the centuries to what inhumanities human groups can descend when they look at each other as threats and not as friends and fellow-travellers towards a common destiny. Driven by hatred, people can find hidden resources and unlimited energies in themselves to be able to inflict mortal injuries on the supposed ‘enemy’.

2. Inter-Civilizational Distances Seem to Grow

“There is a way to get the people: get their hearts and the people are won over” (Mencius 4:9).

History tells us that differences are bound to arise between communities, cultures, countries, and even more between civilizations. It is not that we dislike other cultures or civilizations, but we misread their meanings. Little issues assume mighty proportions. We may not go the whole way with Samuel Huntington’s fully developed thesis on the inevitability of the “Clash of Civilizations.”

But we do agree with his central argument that there is a renewed awakening of cultures and civilizations in modern times, and that the boundary lines are sharpening. There are possibilities of increased assertiveness and tensions, and it is good to search for paths that lead to easing of anxieties, dialogue, reconciliation and collaboration.

“In the post-Cold War world,culture counts, and cultural identity is what is most meaningful to people”, says Huntington (Huntington 1997:20). And he adds, “ People define themselves in terms of ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs and institutions. They identify with cultural groups: tribes, ethnic groups, religious communities, nations, and at the broadest level, civilizations” (Ibid 21). Inter-cultural and inter-ethnic conflicts have multiplied. Trying to prove his thesis, he refers to ethnic tensions in Uganda, Burundi, Zaire, Nigeria, the Caucas, Bosnia, Sudan, Sri Lanka and other places. “As of early 1993, for instance, an estimated 48 ethnic wars were occurring throughout the world, and 164 ‘territorial-ethnic claims and conflicts concerning borders’...” (Ibid 35).

3. Ricci Proposes Inter-Civilizational Dialogue

“The Master said....But if even a simple peasant comes in all sincerity and asks me a question, I am ready to thrash the matter out, with all its pros and cons, to the very end” (Analects IX, 7).

It is in this context that the figure of Matteo Ricci stands out tall as a person who was able to lead two mighty civilizations into a happy encounter. Even at the first stage of his encounter with Chinese society he had only words of appreciation about the people he met and their culture; he recognized “nobility of talent, civility of manners, elegance

of language” among the Chinese people. He sought to make himself a Chinese of his own choice. His graciousness and suavity amazed the people. He was acknowledged as a perfect gentleman.

He presented himself as an intellectual from the West, and was happy to introduce the assets and values of his civilization, like technological products, ideas and ethos to the Chinese in a convincing style. He overcame existing prejudices with amazing skill. Joseph Needham F.R.S in his *Science and Civilization in China* says that the Ricci's efforts towards dialogue “stand for all time as an example of cultural relations at the highest level between civilizations heretofore sundered.”

Art was another area of common interest. The western techniques of perspective amazed the Chinese society.

Ricci's writings on friendship, memory techniques, natural law, married life, and attributes of God were widely read and admired in spite of the fact that the concepts contained therein differed greatly from those prevalent in Chinese community. He wrote home contributing to building up a positive image of the Chinese civilization in the West. He felt it was his duty to build bridges. He worked hard engaging himself in discussions with a continuous stream of visitors even late into the night. His efforts did not fail to win recognition from people, intellectuals and by the Emperor himself. He was assigned imperial quarters for his residence. And when he died, his body was made to rest at an honoured place on imperial grounds. His memory continues to live.

The exchange of clocks, maps, poetry, mathematical knowledge and ethical thoughts were merely symbols of

a deeper desire Ricci had, that of bringing the minds of the Western and Chinese societies to meet and enter into a dialogue. The need of the hour in our own times is precisely to bring cultures and civilizations into a mutually beneficial conversation so that all societies concerned can profit from it instead of coming into collision. In this brief paper I would like to apply Matteo Ricci's message to the present day context of tensions between civilizational groups.

4. Definition of a Civilization

“To be one with the world is wisdom” (Tirukkural).

Toynbee defined civilization as “an endeavour to create a state of society in which the whole Mankind will be able to live together in harmony, as members of a single all-inclusive family” (Toynbee 1995:44). A civilization is meant to be a unifying space. “Behind every civilization there is a vision,” says Christopher Dawson. The very concept of civilization implies, therefore, an eagerness to realize a unique vision in behalf of the whole of humanity as one united family, not merely in behalf of the particular society where it took shape.

Fernand Braudel defines civilization as a space, a cultural area, a collection of cultural characteristics and phenomena. Wallerstein calls it a particular concatenation of worldview, customs, structures, and culture. For Dawson it is a particular original process of cultural creativity, for Durkheim and Mauss it is a kind of moral milieu encompassing a certain number of nations. Huntington defines it as the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level cultural identity people have (Huntington 1997: 43).

5. Identity and Inner Sturdiness of Civilizations

He [the sage] is free from self-display, and therefore he shines (Tao Tè Ching 22).

A civilization comes into existence, according to Toynbee, when a society tries to respond to an extraordinary challenge, which calls for an unprecedented effort to survive. Different societies respond differently to the same or similar challenges, evolve differently, and take on different identities. Some societies may not gather enough determination to respond at all, and get submerged or sidelined in the process. Those that emerge, preserve sustaining power as long as their inner spirit does not fail. Though empires rise and fall, civilizations live on. Governments come and go, “civilizations remain and ‘survive political, social, economic, even ideological upheavals’” (Huntington 1997:43).

Usually we evaluate a civilization for the quality of its material products, e.g. buildings, structures, artefacts. But ultimately material achievements alone are not the true measure of the progress of a civilization. In this respect, the self-congratulation of the technologically more advanced nations and communities of our times is misplaced. In fact, the greatest material achievements may be made by a civilization even when it is well on the way to decline.

It is only when the energies, spared from physical labour through an advance in technology and organization, are used for spiritual search and profounder self-articulation that a civilization may be said to be in the process of growth. Such an undertaking is always led by charismatic individuals or creative minorities who inspire their society with a vision of life and of realities which they have developed through a

profound inner experience.

6. What Can Cause the Breakdown of Civilizations

“People in their conduct of affairs are constantly ruining them when they are on the eve of success” (Tao Te Ching 64).

For all the sturdiness that civilizations build up, they too are fragile entities. Spengler thought civilizations were organic entities, following an inevitable birth-growth-death pattern. Writing during the second decade of the last century, he believed that the Western civilization was already on the way to decline. About that perception of his we do not wish make any judgement. But the fact remains that civilizations are mortal. What happened to the Assyrian, Babylonian, Egyptian and Persian civilizations can happen to others as well, even to the most advanced.

In Toynbee’s view, a civilization moves on to a path of decline and death, when the creative minority that brought it into existence and gave it inspiration and leadership during its process of growth, gradually degenerates into a ‘dominant and oppressive minority’. And it finally breaks down when the same minority entrenches itself in an unassailable position of exploitative advantage over the rest of their society.

A civilization can recapture its dynamism by returning to the original values that led it to success. But this does not always happen. The danger is that during the period of decline an uncreative elite take over and begin to idolize their past in compensation for the values that they have already given up, idealizing the achievements of their ancestors, institutions, techniques, in short their ‘dead selves’. They

continue to worship the ‘ghost’ of their ancient glory and propagate that devotion in the wider society. Many religious fundamentalists and radical nationalists in different parts of the world today make this mistake.

7. The Encounter of Civilizations

“You shall speak to men good words” (Quran 2,83).

Civilizations have interacted with each other down the centuries. But in our times, encounters between civilizations have increased a thousand fold. It is becoming abundantly clear that no one can hope to thrive in isolation. Closing in upon oneself, one becomes incapable of facing the social realities that are rapidly changing. New realities push the unprepared to the margins or inferior positions, and there they remain in a helpless condition.

As we have seen earlier, “behind every civilization there is a vision” (Christopher Dawson). During interactions between civilizations, troubles start when one vision seeks to impose itself on another, or when the perceived interests of a civilization clash with those of another, or when messages are misread. In these difficult situations, those would prove most helpful who point the way to dialogue. Many problems can be solved with respectful mutual attention and sympathetic understanding.

Demonizing communities or countries, or isolating them and branding them with negative titles are not helpful. In times of tension we need persons who seek to understand across cultures and build bridges to facilitate mutual relationships. In today’s world we need persons who can initiate dialogue even with people whose cultures differ greatly from their own. In this respect Ricci shows us the

way. In fact, his first book in Chinese was precisely on 'Friendship'.

8. Spontaneous Resistance to an alien Civilization

"It is because he (the sage) is free from striving that no one in the world is able to strive with him" (Tao Te Ching 22).

Great civilizations naturally tended to overflow into the neighbourhood, e.g. the Chinese into Korea, Japan and Vietnam; the Indian into Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia; the Arab into West Asia, North Africa and beyond. Later, the high seas favoured frequent interactions, and today worldwide network of communications.

Not always are gifts of a dynamic alien civilization well received. Where the indigenous leadership feels threatened, there is powerful resistance to any form of alien civilizational influence. Resistance grows all the stronger if the intruding civilization seems to challenge native interests, institutions, concepts and value systems, even going to the point of violence. Violence often, we know, is the response of the weak. That is why even today, while studying the problem of terrorism, it would be more intelligent to approach it with patient curiosity and sympathetic understanding than in a spirit of retaliation.

9. Assimilation into an alien Civilization - Rejection

"When a ruler's personal conduct is correct, his government is effective without the issuing of orders" (Analects 12:5).

A society whose civilization is expanding assimilates into itself willing admirers who feel that their original identity is only enhanced by merging into the glorious civilizational stream that seems to point to the future. There was a period in history when not only enthusiastic individuals but also a vast variety of ethnic groups and consenting communities considered it a privilege to be admitted into the Roman society whose star seemed to be on the ascendant. The Scandinavians, Hungarians (Magyars who were of Asiatic origin) and a section of the Slavs like Poles, Slovaks, Slovenes, Croats and others cast in their lots with the emerging West when they thought that their future lay there. One may observe, similarly, the wide acceptance of the civilizations of the Han Chinese in East Asia, of the Indo-Aryans on the Indian subcontinent, of the Arabs in West Asia and North Africa.

However, at some stage there begins a resistance at the periphery, especially when the blessings of a once-triumphant civilization turn into burdens, e.g. in the form of taxes, or use of force for cultural or religious compliance, political or economic disadvantages. Such opposition may express itself politically in armed uprising, and culturally in heresies, schisms, and native versions of the original inspiration, and even outright apostasies. Very many communities of Syriac origin and other oriental subjects of the Byzantine Empire seceded en bloc to the expanding Arab empire preferring to offer allegiance to people who were civilizationaly closer to them, than serve the oppressive Byzantines, even though these latter belonged to the same religion. Something similar happened in North Africa too.

When any individual society or a civilizational group becomes too powerful, difficulties for it arises

spontaneously: tensions within the group and resistance from neighbours or other threatened societies. Many inter-civilizational and inter-cultural tensions of our days can be explained from the this point of view. An intelligent and sympathetic approach can reduce tensions and strengthen relationships. Ricci can serve an inspiration.

10. Shedding of Negative Memories

“If you shed tears when you miss the sun at night, you also miss the stars” (Tagore).

There are many countries in modern times that are still trying to get over the memories of injuries they have received during their colonial past or the years of their humiliation. The reverses of history had humbled nations and civilizations that had once occupied leading positions in an earlier period; or they felt taken advantage of, for political power, natural resources, or economic advantages. Many of the Asian countries find it hard to forget the past, deal with the present and look to the future with an undisturbed mind.

Unfortunately those for whom the humiliating memories of their colonial past are still fresh are likely have a distorted vision of history and a lop-sided view of the civilization that seems to confront them as a single, monolithic bloc, as though always aggressive, arrogant and dominant. It is good to correct exaggerations and distortions and pay attention to saving features. An understanding of peoples in the context of their overall history will make us condone their mistakes and appreciate their greatness.

But objectively speaking, in human history, injuries have been in all directions. If we go by historic grievances

we shall never be done with it. From whom we will seek compensation? East from the West or vice versa? One religious group against the other, or in the opposite direction? One cultural family pitted against another or the other way round? One day East and West must embrace. North and South will have to learn to work together. And peace shall reign on earth.

11. Many Unintended Gifts Go with Injuries

“He who rules by means of virtue may be compared to the pole-star, which keeps its place while all the other stars pay homage to it” (Analects 2.1)

Unfortunately when two civilizations meet, what are exchanged faster are the less valuable elements, like skills of war and expertise in exploitative trade. Lethal weapons reach faster and further from one to another. Thus, most countries of the developing world have acquired weapons from the Western nations, partly in self-defense and not rarely with aggressive designs against neighbours. Meanwhile disoriented Western youth fall for Asian fake sages, soothsayers and drug peddlers. This is a case of the worst meeting the worst between civilizations, instead of the best meeting the best as it happened when Ricci met with Confucian scholars.

As interactions grow between civilizations, the frequency of borrowing one from the other increases, even if not intended. In all cultural encounters, one thing leads to another. While the West took advantage of many nations in their weaknesses, it passed on an interest in science and technology that strengthened the weaker nations. Some were very quick in profiting from this encounter. While the East felt humiliated and disregarded, its heritage of wisdom

and spiritual search drew the attention of many intellectuals in the West. This encounter made the thinking element in the West realize that there are vast areas of human interest beyond material achievements.

As Peter the Great in Russia and Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in Turkey thought that the West has something to offer so did Lee Kwan Yee in our own days. In fact, several modern ideologies of the Right and Left came from different Western schools to explain diverse social realities. Each society in Asia accepted one or the other line of thought according to the need of their own situation and the relevance of an ideology.

But not all the West-admiring persons in the non-Western world have shown the ability to distinguish between the core values of the Western civilization and the transitory, superficial, and degrading dimensions of it. Absolutizing a mere 'secular extract' of the old integral Western civilization and proposing it as the new faith for the modern world is a folly of the highest kind. Likewise, there are Asians who do not succeed to identify the core values and central orientations of their own civilization. Here lies the difficulty for a useful encounter of civilizations at this stage. We need Ricci-like scholars, to show the path.

12. Mutual Penetration of Civilizations---A New Synthesis

"First establish yourself in the good; thereafter you should counsel others. The wise man who acts thus will be above reproach" (Dhammapadam 12,2)

Any synthesis that will be worked out between civilizations with a materialistic emphasis will remain imperfect. It would

not be true to the genius of either civilization. Fragility of the Frankenstein that the consumeristic, production-consumption-oriented civilization has produced is becoming more and more evident. It is laden with problems: over-consumption of natural resources, environmental pollution, and social disruption, to mention only a few. Further, the potentialities of the deeper dimensions of civilizations are underestimated, when all gaze is only on Technology and the Market. While we do admit that Economy is very important, there are other dimensions of depth to human society.

It is certain that Indian spiritual intuitions, Chinese genius for building up social cohesion, Japanese ardour for hard work and constant learning, African emphasis on human relationships, the Arab call for submission to God... all these and more, have something unbelievably great to offer to universal human heritage. It is equally certain that the final result of these interactions will not be just one homogeneous universal civilization. Civilizations will continue to give and take, integrate and differentiate, revive and re-incarnate, work out new syntheses and take on new identities. They will live on with new forms and faces, and release incredible energies in periods of transformation.

We only need briefly to look at what Western thinkers and writers like Hegel, Schelling Schopenhauer, Romain Rolland, Ruskin, Yeats, Emerson or Carl Jung have borrowed from Indian thought and traditions, what Indians like Ram Mohan Roy, Rabindra Nath Tagore and Radhakrishnan took from the West, what modern art and popular music in the West borrowed from Africa, and the welcome that Buddhist or Hindu spirituality find in Western society, to understand the extent of mutual borrowing that is going on.

An interesting case is the one of Thoreau in America being influenced by the Bhagavadgita and Upanishads, Gandhi in India being influenced by Thoreau, and Martin Luther King instead of seeking direct tuition from Thoreau coming all the way to India to study Gandhi, and finally many Indians going to America to examine King's experiences... the original Indian thought on non-violence crossing the ocean about four times.

Civilizations that are totally different and even hostile to each other can, step by step, mutually penetrate and amalgamate, compounding their tissues into a new fabric. Toynbee argues that the Hellenic and Syriac civilizations made a new synthesis (Greek philosophy from the former and Christian religion from the latter) to give birth to the present Western civilization, making it impossible for anyone to analyze and identify the component parts. The Indian civilization combined differently with local cultures in Cambodia and Bali (Indonesia); and still more differently at Gandhara integrating with the Hellenic culture. The original Indian inspiration of Buddha worked out several different syntheses in different countries of Asia whose cultures differed greatly from India's. Those countries were never 'Indianized'. They were affirmed in their own original identities, while they drew benefit from an alien civilization. Thus, Kipling's view that 'the East is East and the West is West, the Twain shall never meet' does not stand the test of history. Placing different civilizations in permanent contrast is wrong, they are complementary. Only open-minded searchers like Ricci can identify the areas of agreement.

However, no synthesis that has been arrived at becomes definitive and final. Once the era of glory has passed for

a civilization, tensions arise due to component parts challenging each other in the form of ideological, religious or political differences due to internal re-thinking values, or external threats from a more youthful and dynamic civilization.

13. We Need to Initiate a Dialogue of Civilizations

“You shall speak to men good words” (Quran 2,83).

The intelligent contribution in contexts of conflict is not one of withdrawal from the scene out of ‘respect for the other’, but extending one’s hand in friendship. Together with it comes an offer to share the best of one’s treasured beliefs and convictions for mutual enrichment. It would be a crime to trivialize one’s own or others’ civilizations or stereotype each other for their weaknesses, as is often done.

When the best is brought to the common encounter, the central and significant values of different civilizations meet each other, and the fertilization offers to humanity something new. It is true, every civilization today is at a stage of crisis and transformation. It is for the Intellectual to change every perceived threat into a ‘stimulating challenge’ and every transformation into an ‘ennobling transfiguration’.

In the face of these challenges, we must not act as though we have no resources to count on. Our civilizational heritages provide enormously valuable assets we can build on, making use also of the dynamic new ideas of our times. We are not helpless. We make ourselves helpless only by isolating ourselves from each other or wasting energies in constant rivalry. As Thomas Berry said, “We live immersed in a sea of energy”. This energy primarily belongs to the community, and a big portion destined for each person is to

be found in the other. It has to be discovered and tapped, not by violent snatching, but by drawing it forth gently from each other: sharing thoughts, evoking emotional support, eliciting collaboration.

14. Intellectuals Must Play a Bridge-Building Role to Bring about a Communion of Civilizations

One ignorant of the land asks of one who knows it; he travels forward instructed by the knowing guide. This, indeed, is the blessing of instruction; one finds the path that leads straight onward (Rig Veda 10.32.7).

We are legitimately proud of our rootedness in our own culture and civilization (each one of his/her own). But we are also happy to reach out to other heritages which too have a proud history deserving our respect. We know that we are mutually dependent. Our destinies are interlinked. Historians tell us that civilizations that grew side by side were always locked in relationships that were mutually acknowledging and mutually sustaining, even amidst tensions. It is hard for any civilization to maintain high standards in isolation (Fernandez-Armesto 19).

Nor can we limit ourselves to the wisdom of the past; we must remain open to the new insights of our own times. It was Confucius who said, “If by keeping the old warm one can provide understanding of the new, one is fit to be a teacher” (Analects 2.11). May be the uncertainties of the present era is inviting us to play a bridge-building role between the old and the new.

Time has come for the West to meet the East, the North the South. The old and the new must dialogue. Commerce must be attentive to ethical values, and scientific and

technological research must draw inspiration from spiritual search. The painful memories of the past need to be healed and restored, and a future of harmony constructed together. Such 'impossible' dreams can be realized, not through a 'clash of civilizations' in which the strongest will emerge on top to solve problems, but through a dialogue that will lead to a communion of civilizations. That is the only way all cultures and civilizations will be able to make a rightful contribution to human destiny. This great undertaking has to be initiated by true Scholars, real Intellectuals and Persons of faith.

15. Life is not a Desperate Struggle but a Cooperative Venture

All people are a single nation (Koran II).

Nature gives us models of several patterns of inter-relationships and integrated systems: atoms, molecules, organs, body; individuals, families, tribes, societies, and nations. As the material world is made up of an inseparable network of linkages, and as the human body and nature itself are self-regulating systems, in the same way we belong to each other in an intimate fashion within the human family. Therefore, what we need to make of life is not a competitive struggle, but a cooperative venture, each person and community playing a complementary role with the other, like musicians in a concert.

And when things do turn out that way, something new emerges because we are acting according to the norms of the natural order. We notice the creative forces in nature continuously causing the emergence of something new in the universe: a scientific discovery, a unique poetic intuition, a new vision of social processes, a new understanding of

the cosmic reality. We see that whatever happens in society speaks of connectedness, relationship, interdependence... giving expression to a common, shared spiritual experience.

When we develop a holistic outlook, we see clearly how one reality completes another, and how one vision of life enhances another: economy with ecology, physics with psychology, scientific research with spiritual search, technology with mysticism, social struggle with self-realization. Thus we see that one gleam of truth is not complete without the other.

16. Self-Cultivation with Absolute Determination

O Lord, grant me such qualities of head and heart as would endear me to the enlightened and learned among us, to the ruling class and to all that have eyes to see (Atharva Veda 19,62).

Confucius insisted on self-cultivation to respond to the challenges of his times. The gentleman practices moral cultivation, develops a moral personality, acquires tranquillity. Self-cultivation makes one strong, generous, humble, caring, conciliatory, gracious...and therefore successful. People's differences among themselves are often due to disparities in education (Analects 16.9). "The Master said, without goodness a man cannot for long endure adversity, cannot for long enjoy prosperity" (Analects IV,2). A prepared mind meets with opportunity, which some describe as mere 'good luck'. What is considered mere chance, good luck, a happy coincidence, an unexpected turn of events, is part of the cosmic plan, universal mind, mandate of Heaven.

In times of persistent troubles, there emerge spontaneously

persons with a strong sense of purpose in their lives. Such a person was Mattero Ricci who equipped himself for the challenges that were ahead for him. He studied the great values and traditions prevalent in Chinese society. The first thing, then, one needs to do is to equip oneself adequately for the work, gather knowledge. Confucius said, “At fifteen I set my heart on learning” (Analects 2.4). He continued, “I silently accumulate knowledge; I study and do not get bored; I teach others and do not grow weary—for these things come naturally to me” (Analects 7.2).

Next, they commit themselves to the cause they have chosen with unflagging zeal and absolute fearlessness. The Buddha said, “I neither stood still, nor sat nor lay down until, pacing to and fro, I had mastered that fear and terror”. They do not give up because of difficulties, even repeated failures. “He’s the one who knows it’s no good but goes on trying” (Analects 14,41) said Confucius. A similar teaching we find in the Bhagavad Gita which insists on perseverance in duty, work, action...detachment from fruits, from results, from remunerations and rewards. A lack of appreciation from others does not disconcert persons who are mentally set. For them, their commitment is everything. The pleading of Archimedes while he was being attacked by invading soldiers was not to spare his life, but not ruin his diagrams! (Hobsbawm 557).

17. Placing the Cultural Heritages of the World in Relationship

“For this purpose I was born,...to go and spread righteousness everywhere” (Guru Govind Singh).

The most important thing for intellectuals with a sense of purpose in Asia today is to be acquainted with the

foundational literature of various Asian traditions. The concepts, images and symbols contained in them remain deeply imbedded in the collective unconscious of respective communities. They refer to the origins of the human race, its purpose and destiny.

With the passage of time, even the most cherished words of wisdom can grow stale, boring and uninspiring, and irrelevant to the current situation. History can associate them with un-genuineness and superficiality. Therefore, their inner potentiality need be re-awakened. Old teachings need to be re-interpreted and made relevant and capable of addressing the problems of our times: violence, corruption, nuclear arms, abortion, euthanasia, genetic engineering, exploitation of minorities, economic imbalances, destruction of nature. “He who by reanimating the Old can gain knowledge of the New is fit to be a teacher...”, said Confucius.

Intellectuals with a sense of direction help humanity to regain its balance by relating the present to the past, looking to the future, and by putting the diverse cultural heritages of the world in relationship. “The Master said....But if even a simple peasant comes in all sincerity and asks me a question, I am ready to thrash the matter out, with all its pros and cons, to the very end” (Analects IX, 7).

18. We Need Persons of Deeper Insights and Communities of Vision

“Oh men, direct your energies to promote the good of all mankind. Let your relations with all be characterized by love, peace and harmony. Let your hearts beat in unison with human hearts” (Rig Veda 8,49,4).

When we are satisfied with quick-fix solutions as a regular habit, permanent solutions keep evading us. A dosage of drugs will not serve as a permanent solution to psychological problems. A few personality-development tips will not take away guilt feelings for wrong done from human hearts. A double share of consumer goods will not satisfy the spiritual hunger of a society. Financial compensations will not make up for the injury inflicted on the culture and identity of a dying community (tribe, ethnic group). In the same way, a list of punishments will not be an adequate response to the needs of a society that is agonizing with pain for the absence of ethical and spiritual guidance.

We need today persons of deeper insight and ‘communities of vision’, who are able to anticipate the future and make it come about through committed action. Asians should not forget that “For nearly all of world history the richest and most developed societies have been in Asia” (Ponting 9). Asia has shown the way on many occasions, it can still do in the future if it will remain true to its identity and to its vocation.

If at some period of history Asia has lost its initiative we can seek to find out why. It can generally be said that the decline of a culture (civilization) takes place when its ideas, customs and social organization become lifeless and its internal harmony is lost; things stagnate, society is lost in superficial issues, in conflict with itself and with neighbours, and uncertainty and confusion prevail. It is at this juncture that creative minorities appear proposing new solutions to the new problems. Silabhadra the 7th century professor in Nalanda University told Hiuen Tsang, a disciple from China, “You have become a disciple in order to benefit

the world”.

It is good to remind ourselves that the inspiring ideas that have roots in our ancient civilizations will prove ultimately more precious than the volume of accumulated capital or an abundance of natural resources that we boast of. Communities whose innovative ideas turn out to be relevant and inspiring, gradually begin to make an impact on others. They transform the world. Arms assail and crush, economies entice and enslave, ideas enlighten, unite and motivate. We do not deny the fact that every civilization holds some negative elements within them as well. However, given the needed good will, the worst can be averted and the best ensured.

19. Gathering Round Great Values and High Ideals

“Let my life be a life of dedication, let my vital breath, eyes, intellect and spirit be dedicated to service.; let my love and my understanding, my prosperity and my knowledge be dedicated to service. Let the service be made in a spirit of utter sacrifice.” (Upanishads).

The unity based on the spiritual bonds provided by a ‘communion of civilizations’ will have the strength to bring together our diverse cultural and religious groups, economic and political interests, ideological and philosophical visions. When we begin to re-capture the spirit of our ancient civilizations, express it in today’s vocabulary, and live them out in dynamic ways and relevant styles, we shall begin to regain our lost energies. When they are brought to actual life situations, they will manifest their strength and validity once again.

With growing instances of violence, corruption, erosion

of culture, damage to environment, and poor governance, there is no denying the fact that our inherited ideas and values are in danger. And the threat comes from those trends in our society that weaken our moral fibre, social bonds, sense of common belonging, commitment to shared values and ideals, and those that promote sectarian thinking. Many of communities that were rural, agricultural, living generally in isolated villages, eking out an existence from seasonal labour, have moved into investment economy and global economy in a matter of a few decades. Along with these changes, new political forces (even radical ones) have arisen at national levels in a manner that could not easily have been foreseen before.

The New Economy is pulling people from their homes, families, religious beliefs, cultural roots, community identities, familiar terrain, and throwing them into the high seas of uncertainties. They have little sense of security or belonging, and experience the weakening of family and community support; no sure concept of the future, no consistent vision or convictions. They miss the cultural continuity that the presence of parents and grandparents, uncles and cousins used to give, the sanctions that the elders of the community used to impose, the certainties that a common heritage used to hand down, and the solidarity that the village community used to offer in moments of crisis. The entire value-system itself is under threat.

We need to stand aside and develop a detached view of things, withdraw for a while and reflect, move apart and meditate. We know that another world is possible. Victor Hugo once said, "There is one thing stronger than all the armies of the world: and that is an idea whose time has come". May be such a time has come for bringing

human civilizations into a communion. However, this possibility can be made a reality only if we build up our inner sturdiness. Mahatma Gandhi said, “Such power as I possess for working in the political field has derived from my experiments in the spiritual field.” No wonder he conveyed his message as much through religious silence, as by political interventions. In these respects Ricci had gone far ahead.

19. The Ricci Style

The journey of thousand miles begins with a single step (Tao Te Ching 64).

I refer to Toynbee again, “In order to save Mankind we have to learn to live together in concord in spite of traditional differences of religion, civilization, nationality, class, and race. In order to live together in concord successfully, we have to know each other, and knowing each other includes knowing each other’s past... Historical forces can be more explosive than atom bombs... We must try to recognize and, as far as possible, to understand, the different cultural configurations in which our common human nature has expressed itself in the different religions, civilizations, and nationalities into which human culture has come to be articulated in the course of its history.” (Toynbee 1995:47).

Our message is something similar. All we add is, “Be gentle as doves” (Matthew 10:16); that is the ‘Asian way’ of communicating a message. For we know and appreciate the wisdom contained in such teachings as this: “Those who lead others in harmony with the Tao (Way) do not use force to subdue others, or attempt to dominate the world through force of arms. For every force there is a counterforce. Violence, even when well intentioned, always rebounds

upon oneself” (Tao Te Ching 30). A non-adversarial approach to each other listening to other voices than our own...., readiness to accept the wisdom of the wider community...that is closer to the Asian way. Dhammapada says, “Do not speak harshly to anybody; those who are spoken to will answer thee in the same way. Angry speech is painful, blows for blows will touch thee” (X,133).

The Physicist David Peat speaks of ‘gentle action’ in this manner, “Gentle action is global... It addresses itself not just to practical issues, as the price of oil or the efficiency of a given factory, but also to values, ethics, and the quality of life.... Like the ripples around the point, it moves inward to converge on a particular issue. Gentle action works not through force and raw energy but by modifying the very processes that generate and sustain an undesired or harmful effect... Gentle action... gives a new dimension to the whole idea of social action” (Hathaway 387).

There is a Ricci style of doing this: Look beyond. Ninian Smart in his “Atlas of the World’s religions” says, “Paradoxically, their (religious believers’) other-worldly gaze brought this-worldly success” (Smart 1999:17). Ricci invited his dialogue partners to look beyond immediate gift-giving and study of Euclid to the study of values of his civilization, and spiritual energies from which they were derived, and relating them to the Chinese worldviews and values. Thus, intelligently relating the immediate and the practical with the aesthetical, ethical and the spiritual of two Great Civilizations he explored the more complete identity of the human being opening doors to immense possibilities. The Ricci way of sharing the assets of Great Civilizations and even of Little Cultures is the only way forward for the human family today.

References

- Braudel, Fernand, A History of Civilizations, Penguin Books, London, 1993
- Dawson, Christopher, dynamics of World History, ISI Books, Wilmington (Delaware), 2002
- Fernandez-Armesto, Felipe, Civilizations, Pan Books, London, 2001
- Gallagher, John, Matteo Ricci, CTS, London,
- Hathaway, Mark & Boff, Leonardo, The Tao of Liberation, Orbis Books, New York, 2009
- Hobsbawm, Eric. The Age of Extremes, Vintage Books, New York, 1995
- Huntington, Samuel P., The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World order, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1997
- Kramer, Kenneth, World Scriptures, Paulist Press, New York, 1986
- Pinker, Steven, The Better Angels of Our Nature, Penguin, London, 2011
- Ponting, Clive, World History, Pimlico, London, 2001
- Smart, Ninian, Atlas of the World's Religions, Oxford, New York, 1995
- Toffler, Alvin, Power Shift, Bantam Books, London, 1992
- Toynbee, Arnold, A Study of History, Oxford, London, 1995
- Toynbee, Arnold, A Study of History (one-vol. ed. Thames & Hudson), Oxford, 1997
- Date Received: Sept 14, 2018
- Date Accepted: Nov 24, 2018
- No of Words: 6997

Pope Francis on Dialogue

Speaking to the participants of the plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Pope Francis underlined the importance of friendship and respect between men and women of different religious traditions. He noted that due to increasing movement of peoples because of phenomena such as migration, Christians are being challenged to be more open to different cultures, religions and traditions.

Quoting from his recently published Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, the Pope said “an attitude of openness in truth and love must prevail in dialogue with believers of non-Christian religions, despite the various obstacles and difficulties, particularly fundamentalism on both sides “Recognizing the fact that there are situations in the world where coexistence is difficult due to fear, the Holy Father underlined that the one way to overcome this fear, was to foster dialogue.

Dialogue, he went on to say, does not mean giving up your identity as a Christian. On the contrary, the Pope stressed “true openness means remaining firm in ones deepest convictions, and therefore being open to understanding others.

Constructive dialogue between people of different religious traditions, Pope Francis continued, also serves to overcome another fear, which, unfortunately we find on the increase in a more heavily secularized society. It is, he said, the fear of different religious traditions and as such the religious dimension. In his concluding comments, the Holy Father said the future for interreligious dialogue lies in the coexistence of respectful diversity, and the fundamental right to religious freedom, in all its dimensions [<http://wccm.org/content/pope-francis-interreligious-dialogue-foster-respect-and-friendship>]