Multi-Civilisational Asia: the Promise and the Peril

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This essay is divided into five sections. We begin by reflecting on civilisational dialogue in the first epoch, the autochthonous epoch, before we move on to the second epoch, the colonial epoch. The third epoch which receives most attention is the contemporary epoch which will focus upon globalisation and civilisational dialogue. This will be followed by a discussion on the reaction to certain patterns of power and dominance associated with globalisation in the contemporary epoch. The fifth and final section of the essay will explore the alternative -- meaning by which the alternative to the communal response to the identity crisis in contemporary civilisations.

The Autochthonous Epoch

The autochthonous epoch is the epoch of indigenous, independent kingdoms and empires which spanned long centuries of Asian history. During this period, there were both positive and negative elements in the interaction between civilisations on the continent. Chinese scholars travelled to India to study Buddhism just as Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese literati journeyed to China to imbibe Confucian ethics. Muslim Rulers dialogued with Christian and Jewish notables in parts of West Asia in the eight and ninth centuries while Muslim savants such as Ibn-a-Nadim and as-Shahrastani in the tenth and eleventh centuries wrote with much warmth about the exemplary qualities of the Buddhists living in their midst in parts of what is today Iran and Afghanistan.[1]

An even more outstanding example of an Islamic scholar reaching out to ‘the other’ was Abu Rayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad Al-Biruni (973-1051 C.E). He not only studied Hinduism, Christianity and Judaism but also developed principles for the comparative analysis of religions. It is remarkable that he tried to be as objective and unbiased as possible in examining the tenets and practices of religions other than his own. Al-Biruni’s Kitab al-Hind which probes Hinduism and Hindu society is a brilliant testimony to this. By studying the religion and civilisation of the Hindus, Al-Biruni hoped it would be easier for the Muslims to dialogue with them. As he put it,
“We think now that what we have related in this book (Kitab al-Hind) will be sufficient for anyone who wants to converse with the Hindus, and to discuss with them questions of religion, science or literature, on the very basis of their own civilization.”[2]

Through the scientific study of other religions and civilisations, Al-Biruni, in a sense, paved the way for the dialogue of civilisations. At a time when the world is beginning to recognise the vital importance of civilisational dialogue -- as reflected in the United Nations’ proclamation of 2001 as the year of the dialogue of civilisations -- it behoves us to remember the pioneering role of that celebrated interlocutor, Al-Biruni.

The flow of religious and cultural ideas across civilisational boundaries was part and parcel of a larger flow involving ideas on science, technology, architecture and art. Between China and the Arab world, the Arab world and India, and India and Southeast Asia, there was an active exchange of knowledge and information which, though restricted to a small elite, was nonetheless significant. It was through such creative interaction that Islamic civilisation which absorbed ideas in both the sciences and the humanities from every conceivable source, became the storehouse of knowledge for the whole of humankind between the eighth and thirteenth centuries.[3]

In this transmission and synthesis of ideas, trade between different states and empires in Asia played a major role. The famous silk route for instance not only facilitated the exchange of goods but also enabled illustrious cities to flourish in what is today central Asia -- cities such as Samarkand and Bokhara which became homes to great libraries and museums. Likewise, trade between China and Southeast Asia brought with it ideas on public administration, town planning, architecture and aesthetics from the former to the latter.[4]

It should be emphasised, however, that while there was intellectual and cultural exchange among an infinitesimal few at the apex of the different civilisations, the vast majority of people lived within their own geographical and social spheres, hardly interacting with outside elements. Needless to say, communities in the distant past bound by kinship ties and ethnic relationships were much more culturally homogenous and physically insulated than they are today. ‘The
cultural or religious other’ just did not exist in their thinking. To put it in another way, communities of antiquity were simply oblivious of other cultures and civilisations. This was understandable, given the nature of political organisation, the type of economic activities and the modes of communication that obtained in what were largely agrarian societies.

Even when communities and cultures came into contact with one another, it was not always peaceful. The history of Asia is littered with tales of wars and conflicts, sometimes between adherents of different faiths and sects. The underlying causes of these conflagrations might not have been linked to religious doctrines or religious practices but they undoubtedly exacerbated inter-community relations.[5] The victor would be subjected to ethnic stereotyping just as the vanquished would be the victim of communal prejudice. Of course, in some instances, after a generation or two, adverse sentiments about ‘the other’ were gradually eradicated. This had happened in a number of Muslim societies where the more all encompassing Muslim identity appears to have been successful in at least minimising communal consciousness. Even in their treatment of non-Muslim communities, Muslim states often ensured that their religious and cultural rights were protected, and that they had the freedom to participate in the economic and social life of the larger society in which these minorities were domiciled.[6]

The Colonial Epoch

Unlike the autochthonous epoch the second epoch characterised by Western colonial dominance over Asia, caused much more stress and strain to inter-community and inter-cultural relations. There is no need to repeat that whether it was the British or the Dutch or the French, colonial policy invariably sought to ‘divide-and-rule’ the local population. Thus, Hindus were pitted against Muslims in British India, the Javanese against the Sumatrans in Dutch Indonesia, and the Khmers against the Vietnamese in French Indo-China. Specific policies in relation to land, agriculture, employment, the public services and education, served to widen the chasm between the communities.

There was yet another dimension to colonial policy which also generated negative consequences for ethnic ties. In Sri Lanka, Malaysia and the Fijis, among other countries, the British brought
in immigrant labour to work in certain sectors of the economy and thus created ethnic enclaves which remained separate and distinct from the indigenous communities. Because the economic and political dichotomies which divided the immigrant and indigenous communities were so severe, the communal problems associated with these two groups have often been perpetuated into the post-colonial era.[7]

But more than the policy of divide and rule, the greatest disservice that colonialism did to inter-community, inter-cultural and inter-civilisational relations in Asia was to redirect the face of each and every Asian country, away from its neighbour towards the metropolitan power in the West. From the economy to education, from administration to entertainment, the colonised state was influenced by, and paid obeisance to, the colonial overlord in London, the Hague, Paris and Washington. It was not just a question of dependence brought about by the colonial exploitation of indigenous resources or economic bondage created by colonial hegemony. For the colonised, the coloniser became, through coercion and persuasion, the exemplar par excellence. Laws, institutions of governance, the mechanics of the market, the school curriculum, the health system, public transportation and indeed each and every facet of life derived its guidance and inspiration from the colonial model.[8]

As a result, the colonised developed a vast corpus of knowledge and information about the coloniser -- his land and history, his culture and geography, his politics and social mores. A student in colonial Malaysia, as a case in point, would know much more about English poetry and British history than he would about Thai music or Indonesian geography. Likewise, it was very likely that a Filipino living under the aegis of American rule would empathise more readily with American literature than with Vietnamese literature even if it had been translated into the English language. To extend the argument further, an English educated Hindu in British India would have greater rapport with Christianity -- because it was perceived as Western -- than with Islam which had millions and millions of adherents in the Indian sub-continent during the height of colonial rule (compared to a few thousand Christians).

By altering relations between cultures and religions in the Asian neighbourhood, colonialism erected formidable barriers against civilisational dialogue. It removed the objective conditions --
the political, economic and social imperatives -- which would make dialogue a necessity. Since there was no real relationship with one’s neighbours, there was no compelling need to engage and interact with them.

Besides, colonialism developed the notion that Asian cultures and communities, religions and civilisations had little to contribute towards human progress.[9] It was a notion which became deeply entrenched in the psyche of many Asians, partly because of the overwhelming power of colonial dominance. Asians began to believe -- as their colonial masters wanted them to -- that their cultures and civilisations had become inert and static. They lacked drive and dynamism. Indeed, their cultures and civilisations, so they were told, only served to keep the people in shackles. Asians had to be liberated from their serfdom by Western civilisation.

What this suggests is that the colonial experience created a deep sense of cultural inferiority in a lot of Asians.[10] This inferiority complex became an obstacle to cultural and civilisational dialogue. For if one’s civilisation is bereft of any greatness, how can one take any pride in it? What is the point of talking to others about one’s civilisation if it is devoid of noble values and outstanding accomplishments? If dialogue is about exchanging ideas, how can intellectually impoverished civilisations engage in dialogue?

It is significant that while Asians were assailed with doubts about their cultures and civilisations in the colonial epoch, they seemed to be a little more certain about the strength and viability of their religions. This is one of the reasons why in spite of the power and potency of colonial rule in Asia, only a small minority, in relative terms, embraced Christianity -- the Christianity that came with Western dominance. Apart from the Philippines, no other Asian country adopted Christianity on a national scale in the colonial period. Only small percentages of Chinese, Indians, Indonesians, Vietnamese, Thais and other Asians became Christians. The vast majority chose to remain Hindu or Buddhist or Muslim. In fact, very, very few Muslims in particular converted to Christianity anywhere in Asia.

It is an equally remarkable fact of history that when Asians began to organise and mobilise the masses to throw off the colonial yoke, many of them turned to religion to provide them with the
inspiration and impetus for their nationalist struggle. The Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj of India, the Sarikat Islam of Indonesia and the Young Men’s Buddhist Association of Burma would be some examples. Religion, in other words, was for many Asians, the most meaningful conduit for articulating the quest for freedom, justice, identity and dignity.

Does this indicate that within Asian civilisations, religions have a special role? In the dialogue of civilisations, will the religious dimension emerge as the most significant factor in a continent whose unique attribute is that it is the birthplace of all the world’s religions? These are some of the questions we will try to answer in the latter part of the essay. For now, we shall turn to the third epoch.

**The Contemporary Epoch**

The third epoch, or the contemporary epoch, begins with the end of formal colonial rule in 1946. That was the year Indonesia proclaimed its Independence from the Dutch. For the last four decades or so, most of Asia has been independent, in the legal and constitutional sense. Has independence resulted in inter-cultural and inter-civilisational dialogue among Asian communities and religions? Is there greater interest in, and commitment towards, developing better understanding among the myriad religions and civilisations of Asia?

There is certainly much more interaction among Asian governments today than in the colonial or the autochthonous epochs. This is a product of a growing realisation among the continent’s political elites that their nations’ destinies are closely intertwined and that they must endeavour to cultivate good neighbourly relations, however immense the odds. It is out of this awareness that a multi-civilisational regional grouping like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has managed to sustain itself.[11] It comprises all the 10 states of Southeast Asia -- Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Burma. ASEAN, at least in terms of its background, embodies 5 religious civilisations -- Buddhist, Christian, Confucian, Hindu and Muslim. There is also the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) consisting of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives and, in a sense, reflecting the religious diversity of the region, with its
Hindu, Muslim Buddhist, Christian and Sikh populations. The former has been far more viable than the latter as a regional organisation.

If governmental ties have expanded within regions and between regions in the Asian continent, it is largely because of trade and economics. There is much more intra-ASEAN trade today, for instance, than 10 years ago. With increasing business ties, comes exchanges in the technological and educational spheres, and even in the cultural arena. Independent of these exchanges, has been the continuous interaction among Asians in the field of sports and, to a much lesser extent, in the entertainment sector.

In spite of this upward trend in intra-Asian ties, it is undeniably true that there have been very few attempts by Asian governments or entrepreneurs or universities or cultural elites to consciously focus upon inter-civilisational understanding. There are only a handful of universities within ASEAN, for instance, that offer courses related to inter-civilisational or even inter-cultural and inter-religious issues.[12] Religious and cultural Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) may espouse causes connected with a particular religious and cultural community but seldom engage in serious inter-religious or inter-cultural dialogue. Governments, even when they are presiding over heterogeneous societies, may provide support to the religious or cultural activities of a particular group but have not been known to be active, enthusiastic patrons of inter-civilisational dialogue -- with one or two exceptions which we shall discuss later.

Why is this so? Perhaps the most important reason is the global system that prevails today, and the process that is conterminous with it, namely, globalisation. Globalisation is in a sense a process that has grown out of the colonial epoch. If, as we have seen, under colonialism individual Western powers dominated and controlled Asian societies thus crippling the development of their potential and circumscribing the scope for inter-state, inter-cultural exchange, today, there are global centres of power and global elites, located mainly in the West, exercising tremendous influence over the direction of the global economy, global politics and global culture.[13] Once again, their overwhelming power has stifled and suffocated the capacity of Asian civilisations to identify and articulate ideas and values from their own heritage and to present them as the bases for dialogue and mutual understanding. Unlike the colonial
past, these new centres of power and new elites are not just linked to nation-states like the United States of America -- the world’s only superpower -- but are also connected to international institutions such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and to transnational corporations (TNCs) and money markets.[14]

It is the TNCs and the money markets that set the tone and tenor of the global economy and indeed of most domestic economies. 500 corporations for instance account for 70 per cent of world trade. Many small and middling economies in the South are very dependent upon TNCs for investments, technology, skills and most of all market reach. If the WTO succeeds in pushing its investment agenda, TNCs will be able to exercise even greater control over national economies, since there would be hardly any restrictions on their right to expand domestic operations or to repatriate profits.[15] Likewise, currency trading now dominates global financial transactions. Only 2 to 3 per cent of transactions are connected directly to real commerce and industry. Currency trading, on the other hand, which is indistinguishable from sheer speculation, runs to something like 1.5 trillion dollars a day. This is almost equivalent to the total annual output of the German economy or to four times total world expenditure on crude oil.[16] The volume and value of speculative capital has become so huge that no economy today can insulate itself from money markets and their operations.

What this means is that there is very little room for independent economic initiatives. And yet scope for autonomous action and organisation is important for economic globalisation carries with it practices, attitudes and values which are diametrically antithetical to some of the cardinal principles and precepts contained in most religious philosophies. The incessant drive to produce and to expand production, often stimulated by the constant titillation of the senses through seductive advertisements -- a feature of TNC operations -- is at variance with the Buddhist and Muslim ethic of restraint and self-control. Similarly, the consumer culture, so much a part of contemporary capitalism, would not harmonise with either Hinduism or Christianity or any of the other religions with their emphasis upon limiting our wants and desires. Neither would religion approve of the pronounced materialistic thrust of economic globalisation. Since economic globalisation seeks to deregulate, liberalise and privatise in order to allow for the untrammelled flow of capital and the unbridled accumulation of wealth, it would run contrary to the moral
teachings of all great faiths which have always admonished those who are obsessed with the possession of riches. In Islam, as in Judaism, it is the equitable distribution of wealth and the alleviation of poverty that are regarded as acts of piety. Economic globalisation, in contrast, has resulted in both the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few and the widening of disparities between rich and poor.[17]

There is yet another characteristic of economic globalisation which would go against the grain of religion. The preponderant power of speculative capital in today’s economy -- which had prompted an economist to describe the present phase of capitalism as casino capitalism[18] -- would be condemned by Islam and Christianity, on the one hand, and Hinduism and Buddhism, on the other. In Islam, for instance, money is a medium of exchange, not a commodity to speculate upon, or gamble with.[19]

By showing how economic globalisation violates some of our most fundamental moral and spiritual values, one is not denying that certain countries where the rituals of Buddhism and Confucianism are widely practised also tend to promote and propagate casino capitalism. After all, East Asian and Southeast Asian countries such as South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore are acknowledged as important digits in the global economy. And, it is true that sections of the populace in other parts of Asia have also benefitted from economic globalisation. But this has happened only because they have adjusted to the demands and dictates of globalisation without any regard for some of the contrarian values and principles in their religious and cultural philosophies.

How does political globalisation fare in relation to spiritual and moral values found in religion? The rapid spread of the democratic form of government, with the emphasis upon human rights, in particular civil and political liberties, periodic elections, multi-party competition and peaceful, orderly change has been one of the most remarkable developments of our time. On the whole, the triumph of democracy as a global phenomenon, in the wake of the end of the cold war, has been a boon to humankind, including the people of Asia.
Nonetheless, democracy as interpreted by the forces of globalisation has also marginalised certain ideas and notions of governance associated with Asian spiritual traditions. Has the preoccupation with civil and political liberties served to sideline economic, social and cultural rights?[20] Wouldn’t a more holistic vision of rights make more sense, both from the standpoint of the concept of the human being in some of our philosophies and from the perspective of the realities obtaining in Asian societies where economic rights such as the right to food, social rights such as the right to education and cultural rights such as the right to study one’s mother tongue are as basic as the freedom of expression and assembly? Equally vital, isn’t it true that in almost every Asian philosophy, be it Confucianism or Hinduism, rights cannot be separated from responsibilities?[21] Are responsibilities given any weight at all in globalisation’s democracy? In like manner, by making the individual and individual freedom, the foundation of a just and fair society, has political globalisation downplayed the communitarian dimension which figures so prominently in the value systems of various Asian societies? Does inter-party competition and the significance attached to partisan politics transgress the principle of unity in Islam and other religions, since unity within the community is rooted in the concept of Divine Unity?

The gist of the matter is this: if it were not for globalisation and its push for partisan politics and elections, would Asian societies have evolved alternative forms of governance? Would institutions have emerged that were more representative of values such as consultation and consensus, harmony and integration? Since these and other such values are shared by a number of cultures -- Thai, Javanese and Malay to name a few -- would they have provided a basis for inter-civilisational dialogue in a world that did not have to face the challenge of globalisation? There are of course other perhaps more important issues that political globalisation has brought to the fore which are not really within the purview of this essay. For instance, how can the advocates of democracy espouse the cause of human rights and political freedoms within the sphere of domestic politics and yet ignore the palpably undemocratic, unjust global structures which deny representation and participation to the vast majority of humankind, including the citizens of Asia?[22]

From political globalisation we turn to cultural globalisation. In a sense, the impact of cultural globalisation has been much more penetrative and much more pervasive than either political
globalisation or economic globalisation. Over the last three or four decades in particular, television programmes, films, videos, comics and cartoons, apart from music, drama and dance forms mainly from the United States have found eager ears and eyes in the remotest corners of the earth. The international fame of top Hollywood and CNN personalities is proof of how ubiquitous American culture is. Add to this, coca-cola and McDonalds and t-shirts and reebok shoes and one will get some idea of how America has conquered the world.[23]

The pre-eminence of American culture, it should however be emphasised, has not resulted in the extermination or even the marginalisation of other cultures. Hindi movies, as a case in point, like their Hong Kong counterparts, remain as popular as ever. Japanese, Chinese and Indian cuisine are relished by American and British palates. Women in the capital cities of Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam continue to don their traditional attire. In other words, American films and fast foods may have a global reach but they are not the only fare in town.

The issue is not whether facets of other cultures will survive in the midst of American driven globalisation. The real question is whether underlying values and norms are beginning to change as a consequence of the cumulative, continuous impact of American television and media, in particular, and the popular projection of an American way of life in general. Is stark American individualism, for instance, beginning to take root in parts of urban Asia? Are family relationships beginning to change, as the young in certain Asian cities imitate American kids on television in their brusque behaviour towards their parents and elders? Is the increasing preoccupation with sensate pleasures within segments of the urban middle-class in Asia also due to the influence of the American media, specifically television? Or, are the changes that are occurring the inevitable consequence of other more fundamental transformations that are taking place in the economy and the social structure of various Asian countries, and not because of cultural globalisation per se?

Whatever the real reasons, it is quite apparent that time-tested values connected with individual, family and community in Asian cultures and religions are being challenged in the present epoch. Since values such as the primacy accorded to family relationships are so central to Confucianism, Hinduism and Islam, among other religions, one wonders whether the changes
that are happening will erode yet another principle of living that could have provided a basis for inter-civilisational communication.

The political, economic and cultural dimensions of globalisation which we have analysed, and other aspects of the process that we have not discussed, taken together, represent an overwhelmingly powerful system. To reiterate, it is a system which emerged from Western colonial dominance but whose impact, influence and authority is much greater than the power exercised by individual colonial powers. Modern communication technologies have undoubtedly played a big part in facilitating this. It is a truism that without television, the computer and internet, globalisation would not have become such a powerful phenomenon. Since the computer revolution is a product of scientific and technological advancements associated with the United States one can understand why that country is in the forefront of globalisation.

But technology alone cannot explain the power of globalisation. The ideas and instruments of globalisation -- whether it is individual freedom or the internet -- have an appeal of their own. Besides, as we have noted, it is a process which has brought some benefits to sections of humanity.

This is why globalisation, unlike colonialism, is not perceived as dominance and oppression in some quarters. The centres of power and the elites in the West have succeeded in making it appear as if it is integral to development and progress. But not everyone is convinced. A lot of people in Asia and elsewhere know that globalisation has not only marginalised the poor and powerless but it has also, as we have shown, subordinated non-Western civilisations, their ideas and ideals, their values and visions.[24] This has now provoked a reaction in a number of Asian societies.
We are concerned with a specific aspect of the reaction to globalisation -- namely, the perception that it is a threat to civilisational identity and integrity. And it is a particular type of reaction that we shall focus upon.

While there have been varied reactions to the challenge to civilisational identity, it is those who have chosen to re-assert their own identity in an exclusive manner that will be the subject of our analysis. This exclusive re-assertion of identity is taking place in a number of countries. In India, it has taken the form of Hindu revivalism; in Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia, there is Islamic revivalism; and in Sri Lanka, there is Buddhist revivalism.

Let us clarify, at the outset, that revivalism in all these countries is not due entirely to globalisation or even to Western colonial dominance. The failure of so-called secular elites and secular ideologies to overcome the challenge of poverty and destitution among the masses; corruption and abuse of power at the apex of society; political repression and authoritarianism; and latent or manifest antagonism towards ‘the other’ within one’s milieu, have all contributed towards religious revivalism.[25] Globalisation is a factor insofar as its dominant power -- which mirrors Western hegemony -- is seen as a formidable obstacle to the reviver's desire to build an alternative culture and civilisation that is authentic, that is rooted in one’s own tradition and patrimony.[26]

This explains why in India, the Hindu revivalists (together with other groups) have been battling some of the symbols of globalisation -- Kentucky Fried Chicken and MacDonalds’ outfits, Kellog cereals firms and coca-cola corporations. They have also sought to protect Indian interests in the face of the WTO’s intellectual property rights regime. Even the participation of Hindu girls in beauty pageants, viewed as demeaning to the religion, was proof of the negative side of globalisation. For Islamic revivalists in Malaysia, on the other hand, pornography on the net and the propagation of ‘yellow culture’ are among the adverse consequences of globalisation that have to be repelled and resisted. They have also been critical of WTO’s investment rules which are detrimental to the interests of developing nations.
However, it is not on issues related to the economic and cultural dimensions of globalisation that revivalist thinking is a problem. It is in their understanding of, and approach to, their own tradition, and how they should relate to ‘the other’ that the revivalists seem to falter. The Hindu revivalists, for instance, emphasise rituals and symbols connected with their religion. Building a temple, resurrecting an ancient rite or ensuring that a certain ritual is meticulously observed, would be the essence of faith for the revivalists. At the same time, they are determined to rewrite Indian history purportedly to give Hinduism its legitimate place. This is part of the attempt to right the wrongs allegedly committed against the Hindus by Muslims, Christians and other enemies of the religion. Since the mainstay of the ruling coalition in India is a Hindu revivalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the revivalists are in a position to implement at least a part of their agenda.

Not unexpectedly, the activities of the BJP and the revivalists have generated some apprehension among the large Muslim and small Christian minorities. The destruction of India’s oldest mosque, the Babri mosque, in Delhi in 1992 was an example of the zealotry that the revivalists had unleashed.[27] The religious riots that followed the Babri incident, first in Delhi then in Bombay, which claimed thousands of lives, revealed in all their ugliness the threat that religious fanaticism posed to Indian society. Muslim fears about Hindu communalism are shared to some extent by the Christians. A couple of dastardly killings of Christians allegedly by Hindus have only aggravated their sense of insecurity.

Religious revivalism of this sort with its pronounced antipathy towards ‘the other’, it is obvious, does not help inter-faith or inter-civilisational dialogue. If anything, it widens the gulf between the communities. Unfortunately, this is what is also happening in Pakistan where fanatical elements within the Muslim majority have been utterly callous in their attitude towards the Christian and Hindu minorities and in Sri Lanka, where a small group of Buddhist monks are in the forefront of a chauvinistic movement to constrict further the rights of the Tamil minority.

In Malaysia, the situation is somewhat different. The Islamic revivalists are, on the whole, more accomodative in their approach to the non-Muslim minorities, compared to most other countries
in the region. But then the minorities constitute almost 40 per cent of the population. The
revivalists profess an interest in dialoging with them though it appears from the meetings that
have taken place that they are only keen on propagating their version of an Islamic state to the
non-Muslims. They have yet to appreciate the simple fact that the quintessence of dialogue is
listening and learning.[28] -- listening to the other’s story and learning from her experience.

The track record of the revivalists in different Asian settings demonstrates that when groups
return to religion and re-assert their identity, it need not lead to more amicable inter-community
relations. On the contrary, it can even make the situation much worse especially if there are
other conditions present that portend towards conflict.

The Alternative

While there are religious groups that are exclusive and communal, there are others, which we
have alluded to, that are genuinely committed to inter-faith, inter-civilisational dialogue. They
may be few and far between but because they are inclusive and universal in outlook they hold the
key to inter-civilisational understanding and empathy in the future.

There are two important characteristics about these groups and the individuals associated with
them. Apart from their inclusive attitude, they also seek to focus upon the substantive, as against
the symbolic, dimension of religion. For them justice and freedom, love and compassion,
equality and integrity, modesty and humility, restraint and discipline, and the efforts to translate
these fundamental values, into laws, policies and institutions, constitute the essence of faith.[29]
This does not mean that they do not appreciate the role of forms and symbols, rituals and
practices in religion. They do, but they realise that the meaning and message behind a symbol or
ritual is what endows it with strength and vitality.

Because their approach is inclusive and the values they espouse are not only universal but also
identifiable with other religious communities, these groups and individuals will be completely at
ease with inter-civilisational dialogue. In almost every country in Asia, there are groups like
this, though their influence is limited. Among the leading lights of religious universalism -- as
against religious revivalism -- in Asia today would be Swami Agnivesh of India, Ariyaratne of Sri Lanka, Nurcholis Madjid of Indonesia and Bishop Labayan of the Philippines. Though these four individuals come from different religious backgrounds, they speak the same global language -- of a God who belongs to all and yet to none; of the human being as God’s trustee with the sacred responsibility of advocating what is right and prohibiting what is wrong; of universal, perennial values as the foundation of an ethical society; and of rights, responsibilities, roles and relationships shaped by these values that provide human life with harmony and equilibrium.

The alternative visions [30] of these and other individuals resonate with the outlook of a couple of Asian political leaders who realise the importance of civilisational dialogue. The former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim, for instance, initiated a dialogue between Islam and Confucianism in 1995. No high-level government leader in Malaysia before him had undertaken such a task.[31] Anwar argues eloquently that “The primary motive of civilisational dialogue must be a global convivencia, a harmonious and enriching experience of living together among people of diverse religions and cultures. To enter a more meaningful stage of engagement between Asia and the West, it must be an encounter between equals, between cherished ideals and values that will serve to challenge our pride and end our prejudices.”[32]

The other Asian leader who has been in the forefront of inter-civilisational dialogue is, of course, the President of Iran, Mohammed Khatami. It was he who proposed that the UN declare 2001 as the year of the dialogue of civilisations. Displaying an intimate grasp of the issues involved in civilisational dialogue he observed in a lecture to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 1997, “With the terrible gap between the rich and the poor in various communities and countries of the world, how can we naively call for peace and mutual understanding? How can we call for dialogue if this inequality persists and if no fundamental steps are taken to help the deprived peoples of the world? ..... On the threshold of the third millennium, the destiny of our world is common for all. For this destiny to be a just and happy one, the only course of action is a dialogue among various cultures and civilisations. We should remember that although in the twentieth century the sword held sway, and some people won and others lost with each sweep of its blade the next century should revolve around dialogue.
Otherwise, this sword will reemerge as a two-edged weapon that will spare no one, and it is quite possible that the mighty warmongers will be among its first victims.”[33]

At the beginning of the third millennium, and in the year of civilisational dialogue, it is apparent that there are governments, NGOs and individuals who are deeply committed to the noble goal of bringing people of different religions, cultures and civilisations closer together on the basis of shared universal spiritual and moral values. But there are impediments. The global system is one of them. Exclusive, communal attitudes within religious and cultural communities is another.[34] However, the realities that challenge all of us -- more and more societies are becoming ethnically heterogeneous; nations everywhere are becoming more and more interdependent -- leave us with no choice. Either we dialogue with one another or we die together. That is the promise and the peril.

8 July 2001

ENDNOTES

[4] For an analysis of trade between China and Southeast Asia see Wang Gungwu Community and Nation: Essays on Southeast Asia and the Chinese (Kuala Lumpur/Hong Kong: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd) especially the chapters on ‘Early Ming Relations with Southeast Asia’, ‘China and Southeast Asia 1402-1424’ and ‘The Opening of Relations between China and Malacca 1403-1405’.

[8] For a study of the impact of Western colonial dominance upon Asia see K.M. Panikkar *Asia and Western Dominance* (Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press 1993).


[12] The Centre for Civilisational Dialogue at the University of Malaya is one of them. Established in March 1997, the Centre offers undergraduate and postgraduate programmes aimed at enhancing understanding of the primary issues involved in civilisational dialogue in the age of globalisation.


[18] This is the term popularised by Susan Strange *Casino Capitalism* (Manchester: University Press 1997).


[23] There is some discussion of this trend in Cess J. Hamelink *Trends in World Communication* (Penang: Southbound/Third World Network 1994).


[27] See several articles in ‘Communique’ (Hong Kong: ARENA 1993) Nos 19 & 20, November 1993 for a study of communal politics arising from the Babri incident.
This is a view that has been well expressed by Leonard Swindler ‘The Age of Global Dialogue’ Prajna Vihara (Bangkok: Assumption University) The Journal of Philosophy and Religion Vol. no. 2 July-December 2001.


Though Anwar initiated the dialogue, the government has not kept it going. This is one of the consequences of his incarceration since September 1998. He was convicted on two separate charges of sodomy and interference with the course of justice in connection with allegations of sexual misconduct and is now serving a 15 year jail term. His imprisonment is regarded domestically and internationally as a politically motivated act, aimed at persecuting a political leader who had committed the mortal sin of challenging his chief, the long serving Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad.


See Mohammad Khatami Islam, Dialogue and Civil Society (Canberra: Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies, The Australian National University 2000) p 34.

The question of religion and globalisation is examined in a comprehensive manner in Richard Falk Religion and Humane Global Governance (New York: Palgrave 2001).