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Towards a Coalition of Cultures

Pronouncements on “the dialogue of civilisations” are mushrooming, but why “dialogue” in the first place? After all this term implies the existence of only two sides to the argument, even if they are each represented by numerous participants, and dichotomy tends to generate a temptation for confrontation. And secondly, is the concept of civilisation really supposed to help in the desired dialogue or, in a broader sense, form the basis for understanding the nature of the social communication process at the beginning of the 21st century?

The material impetus for the debate about the significance of the concept of civilisation was provided by an article on “the end of history” by Francis Fukuyama.¹ How many its readers remembered upon reading it that, for Hegel (who perceived history as a slaughterhouse), “the end of history” had come with the victories of Napoleon, and that Hegel’s 20th century interpreter, Alexandre Kojève, had also asked about “the end of history”, long before Fukuyama did? Around the same time, publications by Samuel P. Huntington began to appear on the subject of the clash of civilisations, the publications being interpreted as the thesis of the inevitability of wars between civilisations, even though that thesis was but a consequence of (and an alternative to) the conclusions drawn by Levi Strauss.² And on September 11, 2001 the attack in the USA took place and a new

¹ F. Fukuyama, “The End of History”, *The National Interest* (summer 1989); idem, *End of History and the Last Man* (New York: 1992). Cf. idem, ed. T. Burns *After History? Francis Fukuyama and His Critics* (Lanham: 1994).

² S.P. Huntington, *Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: 1993) (I have used the New York: Simon and Shuster, 1996 edition); L. Strauss, “Race et histoire”, *Le racisme devant la science* (UNESCO, 1960).

shower of statements on Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism, the clash of civilisations etc. followed, with the “Axis of Evil” thrown in. No wonder “experts” appeared who considered the end of history as the annihilation of the present world order caused by a clash between “Western civilisation” and the “civilisation of Islam”.

Many a Muslim thinks that it is all about “the dialogue between the West and Islam”. And yet, we know that today the West is not a unity, nor has it a single boss. The aggregation of states inhabited mainly by Muslims is no such homogenous entity either. And yet the Arab participants in the conference “Islam and the Dialogue of Civilisations” organised in Riyadh recently made bitter comments, to which I and other visitors from the West listened, about “the West” ignoring “the contribution of Islam to western civilisation” and “the arrogance of the West in pursuing an anti-Islamic and anti-Arab policy of uncritical support for Israel”.³

Here in Poland, and generally in Europe, even though Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism are relatively widespread and the mass media frequently rely on clichés, good schools do teach Arab cultures, and quite a few of us still remember people queuing in front of the State Publishing Institute’s (PIW) bookshops to buy a new translation of the Qur’an,⁴ the Polish Tartar community seems never to have been the subject of public controversy or group discrimination, the Sarmatian legend traces the origins of Poles back to the territory of the present Iran, and attitudes towards the parties in the conflict in the Middle East are one of the factors that differentiate the USA from the European Union. What I seek to stress at this point, however, is that even though we use them, such terms as “the West”, “Christianity” or “Islam” no longer, if ever, provide a sufficient conceptual framework for diagnosing the current state of international politics, since there is no single homogenous West, no such Christianity, no such Islam, no actual unification of all the states for which Islam is the state religion. Do civilisations exist today, then?

The pseudo-Latin term “civilisation” was coined over two hundred years ago and first came into common use in France.⁵ Nowa-

³ Krzysztof Bałon has drawn my attention to the timeliness of the conference on intolerance and xenophobia, which was held last year in Durban.

⁴ *Koran*, translated from the Cairo edition (1923, 1342 AH) and prefaced by Józef Bielawski (Warszawa: 1986). The first translation into Polish was by Tarak Buczacki (Warszawa: 1858) working under the influence of Bolesław Kazimirski, the translator of *The Qur’an* into French (Paris: 1840).

⁵ The term was first used by Honoré de Mirabeau in *Ami des hommes*, 1775. However, Dr Johnson refused to include the term in his *Dictionary of the English Language*. Cf. L. Febvre, “Civilisation. Evolution d’un mot et d’un groupe

days, we speak of the civilisation of love and the civilisation of death, people complain of civilisational diseases etc. At school we learn about various civilisations, e.g. the Sumerian, Greek or Aztec civilisations. Every once in a while books devoted to the Atlantean civilisation are published. In Argentina, in the mid-19th century, a politician who called for the organisation of mass European immigration wrote about the clash of the European civilisation with the local barbarism.⁶ The Spanish use the term *raza* to describe representatives of the same civilisation, even though *raza* seems rather to refer to culture,⁷ and yet it is not so different from the concept of race as used at the beginning of the previous century in the US and England by people who believed in the superiority of the “Anglo-Saxon race”.⁸

Civilisation can be optimistically defined as “a direction in the progress of humankind”, as this concept at the early stage of its use was referred to by Jerzy Szacki in his entry in *Wielka Encyklopedia Powszechna*, published by Polish Scientific Publishers (PWN).⁹ Sometimes the term “modern civilization” appears, a concept related to so called modernisation theories, sometimes it is simply a synonym for “westernization”. It is often used simply as a synonym for culture. However, various usage cultures of the term “culture” exist. For two years I used to listen to ironic remarks about the superiority of *Kultur* over *Zivilization*—comments that implicitly re-

d'idées”, in: idem, *Pour une histoire part enti re* (Paris: 1962). H. Serejski, “Pocz tki i dzieje słów 'kultura' i 'cywilizacja' w Polsce”, idem, *Przeszło a tera niejszo* (Wrocław: 1965), p. 237-249.

⁶ D. Sarmiento, *Facundo o La Civilizacimon y la barbarie*, (Santiago de Chile: 1845); the English translation *Life in the Argentine Republic in the Days of the Tyrants or Civilization and Barbarism* (New York: 1868).

⁷ *El Dia de Raza*, the Day of the Race, October 9, is the anniversary of the so called discovery of America by Columbus, and the celebrations associated with it serve the purpose of emphasising the cultural unity of Spain and Hispanic America (the term “Latin America”, which later came into use, was coined by the French, has a different meaning and refers to a larger territory); cf. the concept of *Hispanidad*.

⁸ The superior Aryan race was supposed to preserve its purity in order to maintain its supremacy: S.K. Humphrey, *Mankind, Racial Values and the Racial Prospect* (New York: 1917), and Lord Milner (who was Minister for the Colonies at that time—1919) introduced himself as “a British race patriot”; T.H. von Laue, *The World Revolution of Westernisation* (New York: 1987), p. 224. The concept of race was used to stress dissimilarity.

⁹ A comparison of the entry for “civilisation” as defined in different encyclopaedias might provoke much thinking.

ferred to the USA and France, made by my learned colleagues at the University of Cologne.¹⁰

The concept of civilisation was used by Oswald Spengler, who was the first to put forward the thesis of the fall of the West¹¹, yet it was Arnold Toynbee who was the first author to construct a synthesis of history based on this concept.¹² Civilisation is “an endeavour to create a state of society in which the whole of Mankind will be able to live in harmony, as members of a single all-inclusive family. This is, I believe, the goal at which all civilisations so far known have been aiming unconsciously, if not consciously.”¹³ And then he added that “the relation of ‘civilisations’ and ‘a specific civilisation’ to ‘civilisation’ can be likened to the relation of a single representative of a certain class of phenomena or a larger group of such representatives to the class they represent [its components]. The class represented by civilisations is a certain kind of ‘culture’. Each civilisation pertains to a specific society and it is practically impossible to study a selected civilisation and its society in separation from each other. A specific civilisation can be defined as ‘a cognisable object of study’, as a domain common to particular areas of activity of a certain number of various people, or as a representation of specific types of society.”¹⁴ This combination of a subjective factor and the objective ones was meant to ensure full understanding of civilisation. However, the author found no major followers among the scholars. This might have been because of the difficulty of applying this definition, or because his analysis also had certain religious dimension, especially during the last stage of his work.¹⁵

¹⁰ A German term, *Kulturkreis*, a cultural circle, also exists as a definition of a group of related (?) cultures in neighbouring territories; a concept similar to the one of “large cultural space” or even “civilisation” in the Polish language.

¹¹ O. Spengler wrote about the structure of civilisation (“complex”), *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (München: 1918), *passim*.

¹² A. Toynbee, *Study of History* (pub. in 1934–1961), a work in 12 volumes devoted to the philosophy of history, based on an analysis of the cyclic development and fall of 26 civilisations (later the author accounted for 34 civilisations) during the period from approx. 3,500 B.C. to 1972. At the same time, Toynbee wrote annual analyses of previous year’s events inclusive of the political history of the World War II (co-authored by Jane Caplan) for the Royal Institute of International Affairs. Cf. *Wojna i cywilizacja* (PAX Publishing Institute, 1963).

¹³ A. Toynbee, J. Caplan, *A Study of History. The One-Volume Edition* (OUP, 1988) p. 44.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁵ Toynbee arrived at the conclusion that history was created by God. He rejected the Darwinian theory of the evolution of species. Modern historiography has drawn on his work not so much for the considerations about civilisation as for the analysis of specific cultures from the remote past.

Probably the most prominent historian of the 20th century, Fernand Braudel, also used the concept of civilisation, yet he used it in combination—“civilisation matérielle”,¹⁶ which was translated into Polish as *kultura materialna* (material culture), a concept which Jacek Kochanowicz, the editor for the aforementioned translation, construed as “methods of obtaining energy and goods and the means of consumption”.¹⁷ In the Polish tradition, the term “civilization” encompasses the concepts of technology and modernisation, whereas the most common understanding of the concept of culture refers to the symbolic culture.¹⁸ Braudel, on the other hand, claimed that “culture means civilisation which has not yet reached maturity—its optimum—which has not ensured its sustainability. Before this takes place—and the wait may be lengthy—the neighbouring civilisations exploit it in every way possible, which might not be just, but is only natural.”¹⁹ He must have meant the concept of culture in the broadest sense.

Immanuel Wallerstein believed that the concept of civilisation could be applied with reference to the cultural forms of existence of consecutive imperial worlds in a territory, e.g. to the long continuation of the state in the Chinese territory.²⁰

Toynbee was writing a synthesis of history. Braudel was also writing a historical synthesis. A historical synthesis was also what Wallerstein was aiming for. When Jerzy Jedlicki later

¹⁶ F. Braudel, *Civilisation matérielle et capitalisme, XVe–XVIIIe siècles. Les structures quotidiennes: le possible et l'impossible* (1967). Translated into Polish as *Kultura materialna, gospodarka i kapitalizm XV–XVIII wiek. Tom I. Struktury codzienniego życia. Możliwe i niemożliwe*, trans. Maria Ochab, Piotr Graff (Warszawa: 1992); *vol. II. Gra wymiany*, trans. Ewa Dorota ólkiewska (Warszawa: 1992); *vol. III. Czas wiata*, trans. Jan Strzelecki, Jerzy Strzelecki (Warszawa: 1992). Preface and academic consultation for vols. 1–3—Jacek Kochanowicz. F. Braudel about the concept of *civilisation matérielle*: “The ambiguity of this concept is obvious. I hope, though, that if my way of perceiving the past wins approval, (...) one day we will be able to find a more adequate label to describe this infra-economy, the second, informal sphere of business activity, the sphere which is a domain of self-sufficiency and exchange of goods and services within a limited radius.” (For Braudel, the first sphere was the market, and the third one capitalism.) *vol. I. op. cit.*, p. 20.

¹⁷ *Idem*, *vol. I...* *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁸ “The culture of a given community is a complex of all the forms of social consciousness that are functional in its social practice” — J. Kmita, *O kulturze symbolicznej* (Warszawa: 1982) p. 72. A classic formula of John Locke is recalled: “Consciousness is the perception of what passes in a Man’s own mind.” Cf. the use of the term by C. Miłosz, *Rodzenna Europa* (Kraków: 1994) p. 127.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

²⁰ I. Wallerstein, *The Capitalist World-Economy* (CUP, 1979) p. 158.

asked: “What civilisation do the Poles need?” he was also referring to history,²¹ and the newly established Chair of European Civilisation at College d’Europe in Natolin was filled by Bronisław Geremek, a historian. The concept of civilisation may continue to be useful in historical research; however, to quote Jedlicki, this concept “has never had a strictly specified meaning, in common with other great abstracts of political philosophy which become useful on account of the very fact that their semantic content can be plastically modelled. The concept of civilisation has become indispensable because in a single semantic condensation it contained an enormous sum of patterns which were Western European by origin, but pertaining to all mankind by purpose. And more than just a sum—a system.”²²

My doubts as to the usefulness of this concept for the diagnosis of current international politics derive from the fact that if an all-embracing “world civilization”, the above mentioned “system”, is being created, or perhaps already exists today, then logically what we are dealing with is not a civilisation according to the definitions we have been used to. After all, any civilisation can only exist, i.e. be recognisable, against the background of other civilisations, which entails synchronicity that would be contemporary to us, if we do not want to be limited to history, unless the concept of world civilisation is endowed with an entirely different meaning than the one ascribed to the concepts of civilization, which has been used so far; in that case, though, further use of the same term would be unjustified. In other words, the hypothetical “victory” of a single civilisation as a global system would result in the questioning of the historical—indeed the historiosophical—concept of civilisation,²³ in “the end of civilization”.

In view of the above, still more doubts arise today in relation to the concept of a “civilized” state which would meet “civilisation standards” in compliance with 18th century requirements, i.e. one that would be a Christian monarchy, or even in compliance with contemporary requirements, i.e. one that would be a nation organised in the form of a state (nation-state) and at the same time would

²¹ J. Jedlicki, *Jakiej cywilizacji Polacy potrzebują ? Studia z dziejów idei i wyobrażeń XIX wieku* (Warszawa: 1988).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²³ The opinion that Wallerstein’s definition would survive, provided an additional assumption is made that the “territory” as used in his definition is to be interpreted as the whole globe, remains open for discussion.

be “modern”, capitalist and democratic.²⁴ Given such a capture of the concept of civilisation, many sovereign and recognised states fail to be classified as civilised. Is this supposed to be the “western” ground for “the dialogue between civilizations”? And is not the term “rogue states” tantamount to “uncivilised states”?

However, my principal reservations ensue from the fact that the new reality consists in the formation of a global social structure which is gradually losing its positive correlation with the former frontiers between civilisations, which—to make matters worse—have not yet been adequately determined.

Thus, it is not about a complete rejection of the concept of civilisation, but rather about the use of this concept primarily with respect to the cultures existing in the past, the memory of which is mainly passed on by way of formal teaching, since I would like to use the term “civilization” with reference to a culture of a specific type, a culture of a society that existed in an integral territory for a prolonged period of time under conditions of continuity of the political system and type of economy, and participated in the diffusion of patterns among civilisations in a non-continuous way limited as to the subject, thus achieving a high level of homogeneity, autonomy and self-sufficiency.

The global structure that is coming into existence today is emerging as a result of a decline in the cultural diffusion, consequent upon the gradual disappearance of barriers to social communication, and is characterised by a prodigious increase in trans-cultural flows of information, and consequently, by ever more prominent and rapidly occurring changes within the societies which communicate with one another. The common impression of an accelerated flow of time is the very function of the increased frequency of social change in all areas of life.

The key political problem thus consists in finding a form of co-operation that would ensure collective security with a simultaneous increase, or at least preservation, of cultural diversity within this global social structure. Obviously, cultural diversity will also undergo alterations, as the content and composition of the characteristic features of each culture are subject to change.

²⁴ G. Gong, *The Standard of “Civilisation” in International Society* (Clarendon Press, 1984); I. Neumann, J. Welsh, “The Other in European Self-definition: An Addendum to the Literature on International Society”, *Review of International Studies* 17 (1991), p. 327-348.

The existence of diversity itself is of paramount importance, since development has hitherto been a function of the number of cultures and their diversity, because the contribution of particular cultures to development does not primarily consist in the fact that they contribute their, and exclusively their, discoveries, inventions or ideas to the development of all humankind. If a given culture were to be founded exclusively on its own resources, it would rather be able to generate a short-term series of significant achievements, while through interacting with other cultures it can participate in a long-term process of accumulation of achievements. Thus the long-term contribution finally depends on the dissimilarity of a given culture rather than on its singular accomplishments. For this reason, there is no point in claiming that one culture is now superior, and another one inferior, since the cumulative functioning of all of them is only manifested in their specific coalition.²⁵ Naturally, the greater the number of cultures, the greater the diversity of the complete assemblage of cultures, even though this function may not be linear. Nothing seems to indicate that the relation between the degree of diversity between cultures and development is going to change in the future.

Diversity does not imply the necessity of conflict; it does imply the need for a coalition of cultures. Consequently, the problem of the number, diversity and coalition of cultures appears on the agenda.²⁶ In the practice of international politics, it means that the criteria for global security should be formulated in such a way as to ensure the possibility of making use of the aforementioned diversity of old and new cultures without conflicts. The current state of this politics prompts the conclusion that even though almost all armed conflicts of today are of a domestic character, the problem of trans-national terrorism proves different and is closely related to the debate concerning civilizations.

The trans-national terrorism of today has its fundamental origin in the phenomenon of the world-wide phenomenon of the uneven development, yet the catalysts of these processes also include both the conflict in the Middle East and the diversity within the societies

²⁵ L. Strauss, *op.cit.*, p. 273.

²⁶ If the word "culture" was formerly used to define a specific set of features characteristic of people who inhabit an integral territory, nowadays the concept of culture is more frequently associated with the social role of individuals and the characteristics of a group of individuals which inhabits non-integral territories and is subject to global formative influences individuals who perform the same social roles and who communicate with one another in a way which has not been known before.

of the Muslim states. It is easy to imagine that, in the Arab countries additional anxiety must have emerged in relation to the further intra-political results of such a state of affairs. No wonder then that it was the Saudi heir to the throne, Crown Prince Abdullah, who put forward a concept of agreement between the Arab states and Israel, and the King Abdul Aziz Public Library in Riyadh which convened the conference referred to above. Saudi Arabia has joined the political debate that constitutes a part of the process of forming a new constellation of participants in the post-Cold War global system and the defence of the status quo in the Arab states through participation in the process of trans-cultural communication.²⁷

The protracted conflict in the Middle East has had a major impact on the political culture of the Arab states, where it has contributed to the development of a public political discourse, political polarisation and the extension of democracy construed at least as an increased freedom of public speech on prospects for social development in the Arab states.²⁸ Nonetheless, the desired extended participation of Arab policy-makers in the international discourse has not yet reached beyond the stage of determining the fundamental categories of the discourse as far as certain subjects are concerned. Advancing such issues as "Islam and the dialogue of civilizations" is symptomatic of this situation. This debate is truly important, and the Polish Institute of International Affairs has been taking part in it, thus participating in social communication among cultures, with a view to building a coalition of cultures as a contribution to the collective security.²⁹

²⁷ The Ambassador of the Republic of Poland in Riyadh, Mr Krzysztof Plomiński, drew my attention to *Al-Watan* daily (December 18, 2001) writing about "the western media campaign" launched against Islam, Muslims and Arabs, with the *New York Times* at its spearhead; among other things, the article enumerated in detail the services of Saudi Arabia to the "West", and especially to "America".

²⁸ Very few of the people there (unofficially) call for the State to be an order above all other social orders, inclusive of the religious one, and for democracy to be a standard for all residents of the state, irrespective of their citizenship and sex.

²⁹ When I visited him, the first Deputy Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, Mr Nizar O. Madani, wondered aloud whether, in the nascent international order, the world of Islam was not meant to assume the role of the recently fallen Empire of Evil. Note: Saudi Arabia occupies a special position. After all, it is ruled by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques! And when in one of my talks with the Undersecretary of State at the same ministry I expressed my opinion that the countries of that region might be unable to solve the conflict in the Middle East unassisted (Cf. R. Stemplowski, "Transnarodowa harmonizacja bezpieczeństwa i rozwoju ograniczy transnarodowy terroryzm", *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny*, vol. 1, No. 3 (3) 2001, p. 6-7), Prince Turki bin Mohamed pondered silently for a while and then asked a single-word rhetorical question: "Intervention?". A lecture entitled "A Saudi Personal View of the Middle-East

All explicit manifestations of trans-cultural communication of this kind are invaluable, yet in the present era of globalisation what we need most is a global movement for the coalition of cultures. One of the reasons for the formation of such a coalition is to enable the largest possible number of people in the largest possible number of countries to learn more about other cultures, since it is understanding of the diversity of our world and the promotion of this phenomenon that should be striven for. This would increase the chances for mutual inspiration. Obviously, political and religious leaders, scientists and artists can be expected to communicate with one another.

Let me enumerate several projects that would be feasible without difficult political decisions and substantial financial outlay: drawing on the experience of the Polish-German Textbook Commission, UNESCO could intensify its efforts to improve the state of school textbooks.³⁰ There is much for parliaments to do, to mention only increasing support for state centres for research in inter-cultural relations. The European Parliament for its part should commission reports to find out to what extent Europeans are informed about other cultures, and the perceptions of contemporary Europe held in societies outside Europe; it should launch a debate and take a position on these issues—perhaps even propose a discourse of the European Union and non-European regional integration institutions on the subject of cultures.

A movement for coalition of cultures would create new opportunities. It might attract anti-globalists, who do not accept the present

Problem”, to be delivered at the Polish Institute of International Affairs on May 23 this year by Prince Turki al-Faisal, the President of King Faisal Research Centre and the former head of intelligence, might make it easier for us to understand the new policy pursued by this country.

³⁰ See: B.A. Reardon, *Tolerance: the Threshold of Peace; a Teaching/Learning Guide for Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy*, 1994; *Manual for Human Rights Education: Primary and Secondary Levels*, preliminary draft by K. Savolainen, 1997. *Synthesis of reports by Member States in the Context of the Permanent System of Reporting on Education for Peace, Human Rights, Democracy, International Understanding and Tolerance* of October 18, 2001, contains the following statement: “Issues related to racial discrimination, xenophobia and ethnic and religious intolerance are still accorded very little prominence in educational curricula”, 162 EX/20, Paris, August 7, 2001. *A Handbook for Writers of Children Books* by Mem Fox was published on the UNESCO web-site (Basic Learning Materials Initiative). The recommended subjects include “the stranger comes to town”, and provide recommendations concerning the handling of issues related to ethnic identity, religion, sex etc. “in such a way as to provide enriching and surprising elements for our readers, allowing them to become open to ideas, and other people’s perception of the world”.

state of the world, let alone the prospect of a conflict of cultures, but at the same time lack a specific direction for positive action, and who therefore could be attracted to the concept of rejecting the ideology of inequality of cultures, and to preservation of cultural diversity for the common benefit. This very fact would suffice to elevate efforts for the coalition of cultures, although whenever high idealism is confronted with a naïve platitude a question arises as to what the cost of a possible disappointment would be. However, it is also striking how convergent the ideal of a coalition of cultures is with religious ecumenism, the plea for good-neighbourly relations, Human Rights, processes of regional integration of countries with different cultures etc. The ideal of a coalition of cultures invokes one of the fundamental characteristics of the social existence of a human being: co-operation. What is meant here is a state of mind, be it of an individual or of whole societies, and hence also both the philosophical orientation of a society and the social attitude of an individual. And yet, just as co-operation cannot easily be contained within a single institution, a coalition of cultures does not yield to organisational uniformity. This by no means implies a shortage of tasks to be performed by institutions. Be that as it may, the ability to co-operate—and we, here in Poland, do not form a co-operative society yet, and even our governments find it difficult to learn how to work as coalition of parties—is also an element of our participation tomorrow in the coalition of cultures at every level, in the European Union.

Source: *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny*, t. 2, nr 2 (6), 2002, p. 5–14.