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In Defence of Dialogue of Civilisations: With a Brief Illustration of the Diverging Agreement between Edward Said and Louis Massignon

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Abstract
In this article I want to put forward an intellectual defence of the political discourse of dialogue of civilisations by *challenging* the idea that 'civilisation-based thinking' is necessarily a conflict-generating factor and arguing that, contrary to fashionable assumptions, a civilisational dialogue that wants to contribute to a more peaceful world order requires, in a qualified way, 'stronger' civilisational identities. In particular, I take issue with the academic criticisms to dialogue of civilisations coming from the camp of the critique of the clash of civilisations and well represented by Amartya Sen's explicit and Edward Said's more indirect critiques to 'civilisation-based thinking': by unveiling their implicit endorsement of the Westphalian/secularist presumption, I will show the counter-intuitive political implications of a dialogue among 'strong' civilisational identities and traditions when framed hermeneutically as 'fusion of horizons'. Finally I provide a supplementary brief illustration to my defence of dialogue of civilisations by criticising Said's reading of Louis Massignon – the great 20th century French scholar of Islam – as part of *Orientalism* and suggesting that 'in diverging agreement' with Said, Massignon's work and life stand as a very concrete proof of the possibility of a 'dialogue of civilisations' that escapes the yoke of the *Orientalist* accusations.

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The call for a dialogue of civilisations has emerged in the context of the post-1989 debate on the future of world order, as a set of ideas, often generic but increasingly perceived as a political necessity all over the world to somehow contribute to a more peaceful, multi-cultural and just world order. Since 9/11 the idea of a dialogue of civilisations – and its related components of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue – has been the subject of a proliferation of public initiatives and international meetings, even if it has overall received scant attention by International Relations (IR) and political theorists in clarifying its contribution to an alternative framework for the future world order.[1]

At the same time the idea of a dialogue of civilisations has also been increasingly the object of academic and public criticism. I am not referring here to the supporters of the diametrically opposite thesis of the 'clash of civilisations'; for them, dialogue is impossible and often nothing but a rhetorical *escamotage* in the hands of dangerous illiberal politicians. But I am thinking here of the academic criticisms coming from the camp of the critique of the clash of civilisations and well represented, for example, by the Indian Nobel prize-winner Amartya Sen who accuses what he has dubbed a 'civilization-based thinking' of being extremely dangerous and one which can be deleterious not only when used in the theory of the clash of civilisations, but also in its well-meaning attempts of dialogue.[2] This critique warns against the risk of the political construction of the Self through the opposition to a negative-valued, dangerous or threatening Other. Probably no book has highlighted such a risk, in particular for the relationships between the West and the Muslim world, more than Edward Said's *Orientalism*[3] and there is no question, to my mind, that such an issue is of great topicality in a time when, especially after 9/11, the discourses of the clash of civilisations as well as the 'us versus them' and 'good–evil' oppositions have acquired a worryingly prominent place in the context of the War on Terror.

This argument is a critical challenge to dialogue of civilisations. It is a critique that cannot easily be dismissed as it is widely and sincerely held not only by liberals, but also by a large spectrum of secular-minded and humanist scholars like Sen and Said. In this article I will try to put forward an intellectual defence of the political discourse of dialogue of civilisations by *challenging* the idea that 'civilisation-based thinking' is necessarily a conflict-generating factor and arguing that, contrary to fashionable assumptions, a civilisational dialogue that wants to contribute to a more peaceful world order requires, in a qualified way, 'stronger' civilisational identities. In the first part of the article I delineate the theoretical content of the political discourse of dialogue of civilisations and discuss Sen's explicit and Said's more indirect critiques of 'civilisation-based

1. Examples of these initiatives are: the UN recent initiative for an Alliance of Civilizations, co-sponsored by Spain and Turkey and launched in 2005, see http://unaoc.org/; the UNESCO actions for the dialogue of civilisations, www.unesco.org/dialogue2001; the ISESCO programmes on dialogue of civilisations, www.isesco.org.ma; the World Public Forum 'Dialogue of Civilizations' (a Russian-led initiative), www.wpfdc.org/; the Sant'Egidio community International Meetings 'Peoples and Religions', www.santegidio.org/. For my initial attempt, see 'Dialogue of Civilizations as an Alternative Model for World Order', in *Civilizational Dialogue and World Order: The Other Politics of Cultures, Religions and Civilizations in International Relations*, eds M. Michalis and F. Petito (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 47–67.
2. See Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006).
3. Edward Said, *Orientalism*: *Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1995 [1978]).

thinking'. In order to elucidate my defence of dialogue of civilisations, I set the stage by outlining my analysis of the reassertion of civilisational discourses in the post-Cold War international context and showing the new critical centrality of the resurgence of politicised religions in this process. In the second part, I develop my central argument by, firstly, unveiling Sen's and Said's implicit endorsement of the Westphalian/secularist presumption and, secondly, by showing the counter-intuitive political implications of a dialogue among 'strong' civilisational identities and traditions when framed hermeneutically as a 'fusion of horizons'. Finally, the article turns to a brief illustration of Said's reading of Louis Massignon – the great 20th-century French scholar of Islam – as part of *Orientalism* and suggests that 'in diverging agreement' with Said, Massignon's work and life stand as a very concrete proof of the possibility of a 'dialogue of civilisations' that escapes the yoke of the orientalist accusations.

Before I proceed, however, one comment about the scope of my exploration and three disclaimers are in place. First the scope: by contesting the critical arguments of Sen and Said, this article aims also to implicitly challenge the dominant trend in International Relations (IR) to avoid the theme of dialogue of civilisations because of the danger of essentialising civilisational differences.

Then the disclaimers: firstly, the article moves from an empirical puzzle, that is, the emergence in the post-Cold War era – and its accentuation in the post-9/11 period – of what I call the political discourse of dialogue of civilisations; therefore I am not suggesting that civilisations are more appropriate 'units of analysis' than other options (states, regions, etc.) even if I want to indirectly argue that not enough scholarly attention has been given to this increasingly politically relevant issue. Secondly, by locating this analysis at the intersection of IR and Political Theory (or International Political Theory), I am neither excluding the value of other more historical/sociological-oriented dialogical approaches to IR nor claiming to offer here a concrete argument on how dialogue of civilisations as an alternative model of world order could look like in practice. And thirdly, by briefly discussing Massignon's life and intellectual contribution, I am not making any claim about his potential contribution either to IR or to the theory of dialogue of civilisations, something which would indeed deserve to be explored in a different context- but I am only providing a supplementary illustration to my defence of dialogue of civilisations.

The Political Discourse of Dialogue of Civilisations

The idea of dialogue of civilisations, as I have argued more extensively elsewhere, emerged in the 1990s as a global political discourse against the background of two competing and powerful discourses: Fukuyama's *End of History* and Huntington's *Clash of Civilisations*.[4] From this perspective, the idea of dialogue of civilisations constitutes a third political reaction to the post-Cold War debate on the future of world order and its

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4. See Fabio Petito, 'The Global Political Discourse of Dialogue among Civilizations: Mohammad Khatami and Vaclav Havel', *Global Change, Peace & Security* 19, no. 2 (2007): 103–25. In the discussion that follows I refer to Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1996) and Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

normative structure, that while not a synthesis of the two first discourses, could not be set and framed, I would contend, except against the background of these two intellectually and politically powerful theses.

For Fukuyama, world history, after the defeat of Communism, has reached its end as a dialectical process and liberalism, now 'the only game in town', represents the only *rational* model available worldwide in the now final consolidation of the linear progress of mankind. From this perspective, the problem of the new normative structure of international coexistence is greatly simplified – if not finally resolved – by the globalisation of liberalism: the greater international homogeneity based on the liberal values of the free market, liberal democracy and human rights provides the conditions to develop some form of global governance or cosmopolitan polity to fulfil the Kantian ideal of a perpetual peace.[5] In the jargon of IR, the final victory of liberalism, by extinguishing or at least substantially mitigating the two defining features of the modern international society, anarchy and war, marks *the end of the history* of international relations as we have known them.

For Huntington, the ideological conflicts that had characterised the Cold War would be replaced by cultural conflicts occurring along the fault lines of civilisations. The clash of civilisations thesis puts forward not only what Huntington describes as the best available geopolitical map to understand post-Cold War international relations, but also an argument for a new normative structure for international coexistence: an international order based on a plurality of civilisations and grounded in a minimalist morality of coexistence, mainly understood as an ethics of prudence and reciprocal non-interference geared to prevent the threat of the clash of civilisations.

While there are similarities and differences with both these post 1989 visions, dialogue of civilisations as an argument for the normative basis of contemporary international society cannot be interpreted as a *via media* theoretical position between them. Rather, if attention is shifted from theory to practice, the radical distance between dialogue of civilisations and the other two theses becomes apparent. In particular, while the two envision respectively a 'thin' or 'thick'– but essentially Western-centric and mainly liberal – international society, the political discourse of dialogue of civilisations calls for the reopening and rediscussion of the core Western-centric and liberal assumptions upon which the normative structure of the contemporary international society is based. As such, it represents a powerful normative challenge to the contemporary political orthodoxy implicit in all the major political discourses on the future of world order. In fact, as Amitai Etzioni has convincingly argued:

> both the end-of-history and the clash-of-civilizations arguments approach the non-Western parts of the world as if they have little, if anything, to offer to the conception of a good society – at least to its political and economic design – or to the evolving new global architecture.[6]

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5. Immanuel Kant, 'Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch', in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 93–130.
6. Amitai Etzioni, *From Empire to Community: A New Approach to International Relations* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 26.

Within this horizon, I have argued that three major theoretical and political lines of argument emerge as prerequisites to any normative structure of contemporary international society that wishes to be sensitive to the call for a dialogue of civilisations.[7]

Firstly, if the normative structure of future global coexistence is to be genuinely universal, then it cannot only be liberal and Western-centric. Genuine universality requires a sharp awareness of the presence of different cultures and civilisations in world affairs; in many ways it must also spring from there. A fundamental void looms when this normative structure reflects the tenets of cosmopolitan liberalism, a political tradition that excludes the centrality of cultural and religious identity in the everyday practices of 'really existing communities'.[8]

Secondly, any reflection on a principled world order based on dialogue of civilisations must acknowledge something like a fundamental ethical-political crisis linked to the present liberal Western civilisation and its expansion, and recognise that dialogue of civilisations seems to enshrine the promise of an answer, or rather to chart a path towards an answer as, in the words of one of its most prominent public supporters, Mohammad Khatami, every dialogue, based on a presumption of the worth of the Other, 'provides grounds for human creativity to flourish'.[9]

Finally, the present international situation places on all a moral obligation to pursue an active politics of inter-civilisational understanding by engaging in a concrete practice of cross-cultural dialogue. It cannot be ignored that since 9/11, the shadow of a 'clash of civilizations' came hammering down on the world with incredible velocity, leaving in its wake an atmosphere of fear and war. With this context in mind, a politics of understanding would already be a great achievement, even if to effectively face this challenge at its roots we need to imagine an exit from the strict grid of choices imposed by the contemporary Western-centric and liberal global order and move towards the construction of a multicultural and peaceful international society.

In sum, the political discourse of dialogue of civilisations brings to the fore of contemporary international theory, in a way and with a strength that possibly no other framework does, the link between two critical issues for contemporary international relations, the implications of the Self–Other distinction and the critique of Eurocentrism. But is dialogue of civilisations an adequate response to the challenges of global conflicts along cultural and religious lines?

'Civilization-based Thinking' and the Critiques of Sen and Said

In his last book *Identity and Violence*, Sen has described a 'civilisation-based thinking' as politically irresponsible not only when used in the theory of the clash, but also in its well-meaning attempts of dialogue. Sen argues that when the peoples of the world are categorised according to some singular and overarching system of partitioning, such as civilisational or religious partitioning, this 'yields a "solitarist" approach to human identity,

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7. Petito, 'The Global Political Discourse'.
8. Jean Bethke Elshtain, 'Really Existing Communities', *Review of International Studies* 25, no.1 (1999): 141–6.
9. Mohammad Khatami, speech at the UN General Assembly, New York, 21 September 1998, available at: www.parstimes.com/history/khatami_speech_un.html

which sees human beings as members of exactly one group'.[10] This reductionism – what he also calls civilisational incarceration or confinement – overshadows the plurality of our identities and the interconnectedness of our histories. As he powerfully puts it, 'the illusion of unique identity is much more divisive than the universe of plural and diverse classifications that characterize the world in which we actually live'.[11] As a result, all the well-meaning initiatives at global peace based on the dialogue among cultures, religions and civilisations can have very counterproductive consequences and ultimately 'work against our shared humanity'. In fact, he argues, 'even the *opponents* of the theory of a "clash of civilizations" can, in effect, contribute to propping up its intellectual foundation if they begin by accepting the same singular classification of the world population'.[12]

Therefore, for Sen, the 'main hope of harmony in our troubled world lies in the plurality of our identities, which cut across each other and work against sharp divisions'.[13] This critically includes the recognition of the rich and underestimated fabric of cultural and material interactions that have always characterised world history: from the impossibility of understanding Indian art, literature and foods 'without seeing the range of contributions coming from both Hindus and Muslims in a thoroughly intermingled way', [14] to the recognition that 'Chinese, Arab, Iranian, Indian, and others … influenced the science, mathematics, and philosophy that played a major part in the European Renaissance and, later, the Enlightenment'.[15]

As I have mentioned, probably no book has highlighted the dangers of essentialising civilisational differences more than Said's *Orientalism.* His analysis of the Western conceptions of the Orient as a set of corporate institutions and his powerful exposure of its political function as a discourse inextricably linked to the colonial enterprise, remains a paradigmatic scholarly exemplification of the construction of the Self through its opposition to a negative-valued, dangerous or threatening Other and its implications. But for Said, beyond the specific historical configuration of orientalism as discourse, lies the main intellectual issue raised by *Orientalism*:

> Can one divide human reality … into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions … and survive the consequences humanly? By surviving the consequences humanly, I mean to ask whether there is any way of avoiding the hostility expressed by the division, say, of men into 'us' (Westerners) and 'they' (Orientals).… When one uses categories like Oriental and Western as both the starting and the end point of analysis, research, public policy, the result is usually to polarize the distinction … and limit the human encounter between different, cultures, traditions and societies.[16]

Said links his constructivist approach to identity – 'human identity is not only natural and stable, but constructed, and occasionally even invented outright'[17]– to the almost inevitable political construction of civilisational, but more broadly cultural and religious,

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10. Sen, *Identity and Violence*, xii.
11. Ibid., 17.
12. Ibid., 46 and 41, my emphasis.
13. Ibid., 16.
14. Ibid., 47.
15. Ibid., 56.
16. Said, *Orientalism*, 45–6.
17. Ibid., 332.

identities along friend–enemy lines. As he clearly puts it in the Afterword to the 1995 printing of *Orientalism*: 'the development and maintenance of every culture *requires* the existence of another different and competing *alter ego*…. Each age and society re-creates its "Others"'.[18]

This is why Said never ceased to criticise the descriptions of civilisations as essentialised, static and monolithic and consistently warned against this reification in which he saw the necessary precondition of a dangerous and, possibly violent, political construction of the Other. As he argues in *Culture and Imperialism*, civilisations are hybrid, historically constructed by encounters and exchanges, impure by definition, and always internally contested and objects of a plurality of interpretation.[19] They are ultimately so interrelated and interdependent as to make almost impossible any unitary delineation of their singularity;[20] and in his 2004 book *Power, Politics and Culture*, he reasserts, with even more urgency, the need to explore the 'connections' among cultures because the 'the worst thing ethically and politically is to let separatism simply go on, without understanding the opposite of separatism, which is connectedness'.[21]

For Sen and Said there are, therefore, two main strategies to oppose the dangers of the self-fulfilling prophecy of the clash of civilisations: the constant public exposure of the plurality of human identities and the ceaseless intellectual uncovering of the interconnectedness, borrowing and hybridisation of cultures. Attempts at dialogue of civilisations are explicitly denounced by Sen as playing into the hands of anti-Western fundamentalists for their use of the language of single and divisive identity; and even if in the case of Said's writings and public engagements we cannot find such an explicit rejection of the dialogue of civilisations strategy – and it has also been argued that Said's late writings have been marked by a re-evaluation of dialogical understanding[22] – one cannot avoid thinking that the very last poignant sentence that concludes his largely quoted essay written in reaction to 9/11, 'The Clash of Ignorance', seems to be directed against the supporters of the dialogue of civilisations:

> These are tense times, but it is better to think in terms of powerful and powerless communities, the secular politics of reason and ignorance, and universal principles of justice and injustice, than to wander off in search of vast abstractions that may give momentary satisfaction but little self-knowledge or informed analysis.[23]

In reality, and not dissimilarly from Sen, this scepticism is rooted in a number of theoretical and political positions on culture and religion that Said has developed and maintained throughout his entire academic career. Their discussion, I will argue later in the article, is critical to show how the Westphalian/secularist presumption is at work in the

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18. Ibid., my italics.
19. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).
20. Ibid.
21. Edward Said, *Power, Politics and Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 260.
22. See Said, *Power, Politics, and Culture* and the new 2003 'Preface to the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition' of *Orientalism*. See also Fred Dallmayr's chapter, 'Speaking Truth to Power: In Memory of Edward Said', in *Small Wonder: Global Power and its Discontents* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 95–114.
23. Edward Said, 'The Clash of Ignorance', *The Nation*, http://www.thenation.com/doc/20011022/said, posted on 4 October 2001.

recent critiques of the dialogue of civilisations paradigm. Before turning to that, however, one clarification is in order.

Said and Sen's emphasis on the interconnectedness of world history mirrors the emergence in IR of what I would call a *historical* discourse of dialogue of civilisations, that is, dialogue of civilisations as an argument for the *historical* relevance of civilisational encounters and, in particular, as a call to overcome the predominant Eurocentric understanding of world history that has assumed 'that civilizations interact only at their edges (i.e., *inter*-civilizational relations) thereby obscuring mutually constitutive *trans*-civilizational relations'.[24] This 'dialogical turn' has been recently championed in IR and historical sociology by scholars like John Hobson;[25] and in fact, Hobson has explicitly acknowledged his credit to Said's critique of Eurocentrism and, in particular, the inspiration of his late writings on the 'need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together'.[26] As I have shown, this historical critique of Eurocentrism is an argument that also Sen is fully supportive of, as the many examples of the Eastern origins of the West (to paraphrase the title of an important book by Hobson) scattered throughout *Identity and Violence* prove.[27] But more importantly in the economy of this article, this is an argument also fully endorsed by the supporters of the *political* discourse of dialogue of civilisations and it is one part of their criticism of Eurocentrism, but not the whole. Therefore, what I am defending here, against Said and Sen as well as against the suspicious silence in IR, is dialogue of civilisations as a *normative* source and political (not historical) strategy for the construction of a more peaceful and just world order. The retrieving of the shared world historical heritage can be politically important, but it does not equate to the retrieving, re-actualisation and mobilisation of the social ethics of the great civilisational and religious traditions of the world. There is something here like a diverging agreement, and it is to further elucidate this tension that I want now to by first outlining my understanding of the return of civilisations and religions in international relations.

Civilisations as Strategic Frames of Reference of International Politics and the Centrality of Religion

The political discourse of dialogue of civilisations stresses the global resurgence of cultural and religious pluralism in world politics and the quest for cultural authenticity as the main critical political issues in the relationship between the Western and non-Western worlds. This might well be in part the result of a normative preference of the supporters of dialogue of civilisations, but I would contend that it has to be read in the context of a structural-ideational change of the international system that has further

24. John M. Hobson, 'The Myth of the "Clash of Civilizations" in Dialogical-Historical Context', in UNESCO, *The Encyclopaedia of Life Support Systems* (forthcoming), 1.

25. John M. Hobson, 'The Dialogue of Civilizations in the Making of World Order', in *Civilizational Identity: The Production and Reproduction of 'Civilizations' in International Relations*, eds Martin Hall and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 149–65.

26. Said, 'Preface to the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition', xxii.

27. John M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

intensified with the end of the Cold War: the reassertion, as Johann Arnason has argued – and in this regard Huntington's argument retains part of its validity – of civilisations, defined in a fundamentally *culturalist-religious* sense, as *strategic frames of reference*, not as direct protagonists, of international politics.[28]

As Arnason has observed, Huntington's approach has an implicit 'strong preference for interpretations which stress civilizational closure' whereby there exists a strong case for arguing, as Benjamin Nelson has shown, that inter-civilisational encounters have to be seen as constitutive of civilisational patterns.[29] This article is not the place to discuss the vast critical literature on Huntington's characterisation of 'civilisations'; here it is sufficient to note that Arnason's and Nelson's argument is broadly similar to the thesis of the mutually constitutive *trans*-civilisational relations put forward by Hobson and supported by Said and Sen. What is, however, more critical in the economy of my argument is not what the most appropriate definition of civilisation is; it is rather the recognition – which Huntington has wrongly transferred into the realm of the academic debate on the definition of civilisation – that the current political understanding of civilisations is significantly shaped by religious traditions. In other words, the predominant contemporary *political* use of civilisational discourses has naturalised the still important academic thesis that sees in 'religious cores the most constitutive elements of whole civilizations'.[30]

This ideational development is, in a sense, a typical post-Cold War fact. As Arnason has pointed out, in fact, 'civilizational claims and references now play a more important role in the global ideological context than they did when the rival universalisms of the Cold War era dominated the scene'.[31] It is also, however, the result of what could be termed the cultural turn of the postcolonial world, that is, part of a longer-term process of challenge to Western dominance, intensified from World War II and which Hedley Bull calls the 'revolt against the West'. According to Bull, the revolt against Western dominance comprises five waves: firstly, the struggle for equal sovereignty; secondly, the anti-colonial revolution; thirdly, the struggle for racial equality; fourthly, the struggle for economic justice; and, finally, the struggle for what he calls the cultural liberation.[32] This last stage of the revolt against the West, what is also referred to as the search for

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28. Johann P. Arnason, *Civilizations in Dispute: Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 2003). There exists today a burgeoning body of sociological literature focusing on the idea of civilisation both as an object of study and an analytical category. See the two special issues of *Thesis Eleven* 62, no. 1 (2000) and *International Sociology* 16, no. 3 (2001). For the more recent attention in IR, see Hall and Jackson, eds, *Civilizational Identity* and Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *Civilizations in World Politics*: *Plural and Pluralist Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2009). For a more in-depth articulation of this argument see my paper, 'The Contemporary Ambiguities of Religions as a Source of Civilizational Identity in International Relations', paper presented at the ISA Convention, New Orleans, 17–20 February 2010.
29. Arnason, *Civilizations in Dispute*, 11 and Benjamin Nelson, 'Civilizational Complexes and Intercivilizational Encounters', *Sociological Analysis* 34, no. 2 (1973): 79–105.
30. Arnason, *Civilizations in Dispute*, 233. Of course here the *locus classicus* is Max Weber's analysis of the religious preconditions for Western capitalism, see *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Unwin, 1968).
31. Ibid., 6.
32. Hedley Bull, 'The Revolt against the West', in *The Expansion of International Society*, eds Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 217–28.

cultural authenticity of the non-Western world or the fight against its cultural neo-imperialism, had its most politically visible example in the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran and the worldwide emergence of political Islam, but also in the new cultural assertiveness of Asian countries in the name of so-called 'Asian values'.

It is my contention that the world is still living through this process of cultural revolt against the West, which has arguably intensified when the end of the Cold War implied the political inevitability of a common (political, economic and social) liberal and Western model for the entire planet. The great worldwide religious traditions in this new context have become one of the major voices of resistance and provided the frame for a radical critique against the globalisation of a Western-centric and liberal order. To use the recent effective words of the once Marxist revolutionary and friend of Che Guevara, Regis Debray, 'religion turns out after all not to be the opium of the people, but the vitamin of the weak', and becomes one of the key vectors of the political resistance and struggle in the name of the social ethics and arguments which resonate in the everyday life of people.[33] This is why the postcolonial cultural turn is also a religious one or, as Ashis Nandy has recently noted, implies the return of the sacred.[34] In any case, the process of cultural revolt against the West is extremely relevant to understanding the new centrality in the post-Cold War era of civilisations as *strategic frames of reference* of international politics as well as of politicised religions.

If civilisational politics is the way in which religion infuses or even 'sacralises' contemporary international politics, it must, however, be recognised that civilisational politics is neither new nor unchanging. My claim is that contemporary civilisational politics has clear culturalist/religious connotations, which were far less relevant, for example, during the Cold War when civilisational politics was defined in a fundamentally ideological/political way (liberalism–socialism, individualism–collectivism, free market–planned economy, etc.). It is here enough to think of the political transformation that the notion of the 'West' has gone through: from the Cold War political community of the Free World which easily included, for example, Japan and Turkey, to the culturalist-religious post 1989 notion of a Judaeo-Christian West which makes it much more difficult to refer to Japan and Turkey as part of the West, even if the old strategic and security alliances might still prevail.

Of course, other conceptualisations of civilisations are possible and, therefore, different kinds of civilisational politics can be imagined: for example, we can think of civilisations as material cultures (*civilizations matérielles*) as Fernand Braudel has done with the Mediterranean region, turning upside-down the historical image of this sea as a civilisational-religious fault line, which is still at the base of Huntington's thesis.[35] As a result, civilisations, defined as material cultures, could become a strategic frame of reference for a different civilisational politics of regional integration, as it has been – modestly and not without contradictions – attempted in post 1989 Mediterranean-centred

33. Regis Debray, 'God and the Political Planet', *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2008): 35.
34. Ashis Nandy, 'The Return of the Sacred', Mahesh Chandra Lecture, 13 December 2007, Kathmandu, Nepal, available at: www.soscbaha.org/details/downloads/Return-of-the-Sacred.pdf
35. See Fernard Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1982) and *Civilization and Capitalism: 15th–18th Century* (London: Harper/Collins, 1985).

regional political initiatives, such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership or the more recent Union for the Mediterranean.[36]

The Implications of 'Strong' Civilisational Identities in the Context of Dialogue

As I have shown, for Sen and Said the emphasis on civilisations, and therefore on their cultural and religious sources, always triggers the politically dangerous mechanism of the Self–Other opposition, even if it is articulated within a dialogical framework. In what follows I want to argue that this view is deeply rooted in that constitutive intellectual-political experience of modernity, which Scott Thomas has effectively called the 'Westphalian presumption', according to which the assertiveness of religious and cultural differences in the political realm is doomed to lead to instability, conflicts and political violence and therefore must be privatised, overcome or brought under control if there is to be international order.[37]

The idea that 'civilisation-based thinking' is always a conflict-generating factor is implicit in Said's critique of the construction of the Self through the opposition to a negative-valued Other as well as rather explicit in Sen's recent volume bearing the self-explanatory title: *Identity and Violence*. From both perspectives, there is a sense that to prevent civilisational or religious-inspired political violence, the only viable political strategy is to stress the plurality of human identity and the centrality of *trans*-civilisational relations while, at the same time, reaffirming a 'secular' approach to politics as a way to 'privatise/overcome' the sacral/exclusionary drive that civilisational discourses carry with them.

The issue of secularism is a leitmotif of Sen's *Identity and Violence*, which is full of recurrent and revealing commentaries on what he considers as the negative effect of more recent Western policies which have challenged secular approaches and tried to positively engaged with religions in the solution to the contemporary security equation: for example, in the case of counter-terrorism, we read that it 'had the effect of magnifying the voice of Islamic clerics and other members of the religious establishments on matters that are *not in the domain* of religion',[38] while in the case of strengthening faith-based schools, it 'can have the effect of reducing the role of reasoning which the children may have the opportunity to cultivate and use'.[39] At the end, for Sen, as he succinctly puts it, the problem is that 'culture, literature, science, and mathematics are more easily shared than religion'.[40]

For Said the issue of secularism, or what he calls 'secular criticism', is key to understanding the mechanisms creating orientalism, imperialism and nationalism. Referring to civilisational discourses, Said argues in the conclusion to *The World, the Text, and the Critic*:

36. For my take on these processes, see Fabio Petito and Elisabetta Brighi, eds, *Il Mediterraneo nelle relazioni internazionali* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2010).
37. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion*.
38. Ibid., 83, my italics.
39. Ibid., 117.
40. Sen, *Identity and Violence*, 102.

> To say of such grand ideas and their discourse that they have something in common with religious discourse is to say that each serves as an agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in the deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the other-worldly. Like culture, religion therefore furnishes us with systems of authority and with canons of order whose regular effect is either to compel subservience or to gain adherence. This in turn gives rise to organised and collective passions whose social and intellectual results are often disastrous.[41]

As William Hart has perceptively shown, this is what Said sees as the 'religious effects of culture'.[42] Reinstating Marx's claims that 'the premise of all criticism is the criticism of religion',[43] Said assigns the pejorative adjective of 'religious' to all forms of cultural identity. As Hart writes:

> Said describes those things that he does not like as sacred, religious or theological and what he does like as secular. Secularism is a term of approbation; religion is a term of disapprobation. Thus dogmatism, obscurantism and jargon-ridden language are religious, as are ideas such as nationalism, Orientalism and imperialism.[44]

And he continues:

> Said views religion as a plague that, like any other is best dealt with through quarantine. It should be relegated to private places. There it is less likely to cause harm by contaminating public places or what Said calls the secular world. This is a standard liberal-Enlightenment view. It sounds Jeffersonian with a strong dose of French anti-clericalism.[45]

This secularist view holds a powerful academic status both because of the Westphalian presumption and a certain implicit bias of social sciences (as part of the Enlightenment project) against religious traditions;[46] but it fails to grasp that the role of religions is, in the least, politically ambivalent or ambiguous: religions can, on the one hand, promote political violence and conflicts, but, on the other, also non-violent civic engagement, conflict-resolution and reconciliation. This ambivalence is confirmed by a growing empirically based field of research looking at *all* the major worldwide religious traditions.[47] But more than that, what is becoming increasingly clear is that, to paraphrase the title of an important book by William Cavanaugh, the myth of religious violence is 'one of the foundational legitimating myths of the liberal nation-state' based on 'a broader Enlightenment narrative that has *invented* a dichotomy between the religious

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41. Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 290.
42. William D. Hart, *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
43. Ibid., ix.
44. Ibid., 12.
45. Ibid., 13.
46. See Fabio Petito and Pavlos Hatzopoulos, eds, *Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).
47. See Scott R. Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999); Daniel Philpott, 'Explaining the Political Ambivalence of Religion', *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 3 (2007): 506–25; and William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

and secular and constructed the former as an irrational and dangerous impulse that must give way in public to rational, secular forms of power'.[48]

In other words, the assumption that politicised religion is always conflict-generating overlooks the positive role politicised religion (in a qualified way) can play to the modernisation, democratisation and even peace-building of several countries of the so-called Western and non-Western worlds as well as to the construction of a new normative structure adequate for a more multicultural international society. On the contrary, the political discourse of dialogue of civilisations recognises the above-mentioned ambivalence – it does not, in fact, endorse the view that religions are inherently peace-loving, as Sen critically suggests[49] – and tries to retrieve and mobilise the religious and civilisational resources more conducive to a peaceful and just world.

Not only that: recent analyses on the types of religious identity (and conditions) more likely to produce violent political behaviour seem to suggest a rather different picture from the one assumed by the secularist assumptions according to which, in a schematic manner, stronger religious identities are more violent-prone. It cab be argued, in fact, that religious-inspired political violence, what has also been described as *politically* 'strong religion',[50] is often characterised by *doctrinally* 'weak religions'. In other words, superficial religious identities – if not religious ignorance and indifference – would be the most conducive substratum to violent politicisation by political entrepreneurs. The protestant theologian Miroslav Volf, a Croatian immigrant to the USA, who was personally confronted with this phenomenon first through the use of Christianity in the harrowing civil war in ex-Yugoslavia and then through the fundamentalist politics of his own American co-religionists, has effectively argued that the political violence legitimised by religion is normally the result of the politicisation of a 'vague religiosity' conceived of as exclusively a private affair of individuals or reduced to 'cultural resources endowed with a diffuse aura of sacred'.[51] In other words and contrary to the fashionable assumptions of the 'strong religion *cum* violence' thesis, religiously inspired political violence seems often to be characterised by doctrinally 'weak religions', that is, religious identities that are uprooted and banalised and have often not been sustained by an inter generational process of transmission of tradition. Interestingly, it seems to me that a similar pattern can be observed in the personal and religious background of the Al-Qaeda terrorists who committed the 9/11 attacks: contrary to expectations, they were coming from relatively wealthy typical middle-class families not particularly religious and they seemed to have had a weak (limited in scope and depth) religious literacy, which they had gained mainly through a late radicalisation process.[52] Conversely, doctrinally 'strong' religious identities – rooted in a culture and nurtured by an inter generational process of transmission of tradition – would seem to be more common in religious actors committed to

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48. Ibid., 4, my italics.
49. Sen, *Identity and Violence*.
50. Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby and Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
51. Miroslav Volf, 'Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Justice: A Theological Contribution to a More Peaceful Social Enviroment', *Millennium* 29, no. 3 (2000): 862 and 866.
52. Terry McDermott, *Perfect Soldiers – The Hijackers: Who They Were, Why They Did It* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

processes of conflict-resolution and peace making.[53] This is why it has been argued – to the shock of the secularists like Sen – that more religious literacy and education might be required to decrease the likelihood of an easy manipulation of religious doctrines by political entrepreneurs or ideologues.[54]

To further substantiate such a counter-intuitive view it is useful to mention some recent sociological analyses on the rise of Christian fundamentalism (although the same can arguably be applied to other forms of religious extremism) that suggest the existence of a correlation between the so-called individualisation and subjectivisation of belief (referred to as 'light religion'), and the rise of an assertive communitarianism manifesting the conservative moral positions and political orientations of a 'strong religion'.[55] This would reinforce the view that when religious identities are vague and stripped of a thick reference to an ongoing tradition, politicisation provides a mechanism to supplement a 'light' religious identity and consolidate the community of the faithful around a small number of political slogans and 'hot issues' – as the 'culture war' of the American domestic politics of the last decades seems to suggest, as well as the politicisation of religion in the nationalist construction of the Other in the Balkans of the 1990s has proved.

From this perspective, we can now better understand why the political discourse of dialogue of civilisations calls, *in a qualified way*, for 'more' – and a more positive – engagement with religious and civilisational traditions rather than 'less'. As also Peter Berger, one of the 'converted/repented' fathers of the secularisation thesis, has noted: 'Contrary to currently fashionable assumptions, the difference between civilizations is not a threat in itself but rather a precondition to formulating identities that are characterised by a certain degree of stability.'[56] But in order to unpack this argument, we need now to understand how the relationships between *traditions* (religious and civilisational) and *dialogue* can be better conceptualised. Following the lead of Fred Dallmayr and Richard Shapcott, I want to suggest that the Gadamerian-hermeneutical model of 'fusion of horizons' can help us to understand what the process of inter-civilisational dialogue might look like.[57]

Traditions, Dialogue and 'Fusions of Horizons'

For Gadamer's hermeneutics, dialogue has as its ultimate purpose *understanding*, not rational consensus as, for example, Habermas's discourse ethics envisages through 'the

53. See Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*.
54. Ibid.
55. See Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Le pèlerin et le converti: La religion en mouvement* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999).
56. Peter Berger, 'Conclusion', in *The Limits of Social Cohesion: Conflict and Mediation in Pluralist Societies*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 372. Berger, one of the fathers of the secularisation thesis – see *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967) – has recognised a quarter of a century later that it was an essentially mistaken thesis, see Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999).
57. Fred Dallmayr, 'Dialogue of Civilizations: A Hermeneutical Perspective', in *Dialogue among Civilizations: Some Exemplary Voices* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 17–30; and Richard Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

unforced force of the better argument'.[58] The key aim of a hermeneutical dialogue is to understand the other's point of view in the form of having been able to 'stand in the other's shoes'.[59] Through this image, we can start seeing how the hermeneutical conversation involves the integrity of the ontological difference of the participants, and can only take place as a lived existential experience.

'Standing in the other's shoes' is not the result of a moral humanistic stance, but a necessary intellectual condition since, for Gadamer, 'all interpretations and understanding occur within the tradition or horizon of consciousness constituted by the linguistic and historical tradition, of the interpreter',[60] and therefore there is neither a neutral language nor a tradition-independent rationality which can govern the conversation. But for philosophical hermeneutics – and in this resides its universalist tension – 'linguistic/historic traditions are not "grids" or cages that are inflexible and closed [but they] are open, changing, and contain in Taylor's words "doors to otherness"'.[61]

This last point is critically important to understand a major theoretical difference between the supporters of dialogue of civilisation and their critics, like Said and Sen. As Meili Steele has righty pointed out, 'Said understands traditions and cultures only as ideological traps to be exposed rather than resources to be retrieved … ideological fabrications designed to produce a national or ethnic purity, not a source of rationality'.[62] In a similar fashion, Sen's reflections on civilisations and cultures abound in a very revealing language, with two chapters and one section of *Identity and Violence* being respectively entitled 'Civilizational Confinement', 'Culture and Captivity' and 'Civilizational Incarceration'.[63] This representation of traditions as prisons is part of Sen's merciless and caricatural critique of communitarian philosophies that, in his own view, *de facto* 'undermine or eliminate the possibility and role of choice and reasoning'.[64] Here traditions – whether cultural, religious or civilisational – are constructed as an antithesis of rationality, reproducing the very logic of what MacIntyre has called the Enlightenment Project which, by not recognising itself as a political tradition, envisages as its central mission the supersession of those traditional *worlds* into a universal individually based and rationally justified *modern world*, finally enlightened and freed from the darkness of superstition.[65]

As a result, the Gadamerian 'fusion of horizons' metaphor is not about an easy and unproblematic 'dialectical synthesis' between different traditions engaging dialogically;[66] it is rather the *description of the structure* of the process of understanding itself. In other words, each time understanding takes place – between individuals as well as between a reader and a text – this is in the form of a 'fusion of horizons'. As Shapcott puts it, 'understanding involves a fusion in the sense that it does not involve either the annihilation or

58. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. edn, trans. Joel Winsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989); and Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, 2 vols (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).
59. Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue*, 171.
60. Ibid., 136.
61. Ibid., 142.
62. Meili Steele, *Hiding from History: Politics and Public Imagination* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 126–7.
63. Sen, *Identity and Violence*, 40, 103 and 10.
64. Ibid., 34.
65. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988).
66. For a discussion of this criticism, see Shapcott, *Justice, Community*, 147.

assimilation of existing positions but rather their coming to inhabit a shared perspective'.[67] In this lies the essence of the process of understanding and, as a consequence, its transformative nature as human experience. If genuine understanding is achieved, the participants have to come to see things from a new perspective and to this extent a change in the horizons and traditions that they inhabit – constitutive of their identities – must have taken place. In Gadamer's words: 'Discussion bears fruit when a common language is found. Then the participants part from one another as changed beings. The individual perspectives with which they entered upon the discussion have been transformed, and so they are transformed themselves.'[68]

It is important to stress that if 'understanding requires that we "transpose" or "place" ourselves into the horizon of the other, the real condition of possibility for understanding is our situatedness and belonging *and* a willingness to its disturbance'.[69] In other words, it is in the lack of any shared language at the very heart of our communitarian differences, in the acknowledgment of the deep otherness of the Other, that understanding has its condition of possibility.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Gadamer himself, in two of his last interviews, argued for the need for a political vision similar to the one outlined by the political discourse of dialogue of civilisations:

> And if we then have to become part of a new world civilization, if this is our task, then we shall need a philosophy which is similar to my hermeneutics: a philosophy which teaches us to see the justification for the other's point of view and which thus make us doubt our own.[70]

> The human solidarity that I envisage is not a global uniformity but unity in diversity…. Such unity-in-diversity has to be extended to the whole world – to include Japan, China, India, and also Muslim cultures. Every culture, every people have something distinctive to offer for the solidarity and welfare of humanity.[71]

The idea of dialogue of civilisations points towards a search for the normative basis of a just and peaceful world order that can give shape to such 'unity in diversity'. For such a vision, civilisational traditions need to be seen as resources to retrieve and sources of (practical) rationality to mobilise. Along strikingly similar lines, Richard Falk, re-elaborating his long-standing political engagement for a more principled world order along cosmopolitan lines, has recently argued that the project of a humane global governance – what on other occasions he has also described as 'globalization from below' – requires the contribution of the great religious and cultural traditions of the world.[72]

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67. Ibid., 143.
68. Gadamer quoted in ibid.*,* 144.
69. Ibid., 144–5, my emphasis.
70. Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Interview: The 1920s, 1930s and the Present: National Socialism, German History and German Culture', in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry and History*, eds D. Misgeld and G. Nicholson (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 152.
71. Thomas Pantham, 'Some Dimensions of Universality of Philosophical Hermeneutics: A Conversation with Hans-Georg Gadamer', *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 9 (1992): 132.
72. See Richard Falk, *On Humane Governance: Toward a New Global Politics* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1995). For Falk's more recent argument for a contribution of the great worldwide religious traditions, see *Religion and Humane Global Governance* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

Inclusive forms of religious and cultural traditions can in fact create some countervailing pressures to neutralise the disruptive societal impacts of ascendant market forces by infusing the struggles of the peoples of the world for democracy, equity and sustainability with a vision of human existence that is human-centred yet conscious of the relevance of our surrounding nature, of the sacred and of mysteries beyond the grasp of reason and machines. It is interesting to note that Falk's call for a religious/civilisational orientation to inform the energies of globalisation from below has only secondarily a pragmatic function, that is, it does not merely ask for the recruitment of religions as a means of mobilising and motivating people; primarily, Falk's argument lies in the substantial belief that great world religious and civilisational traditions remain the primary and strongest custodian of a premodern humanistic wisdom that the technological and economy-driven Western societies have almost entirely forgotten.

On the Diverging Agreement between Edward Said and Louis Massignon

As a way of concluding, I want to supplement my defence of dialogue of civilisations by briefly illustrating Said's ambiguous and problematic reading of Louis Massignon (1883–1962) – the great French scholar of Islam – as part of *Orientalism*.[73] In contrast to Said, I argue that Massignon's work and life stand as a very concrete proof of the possibility of a genuine and productive dialogue of civilisations that can escape the yoke of the Orientalist accusation.

To summarise the life of Massignon in a paragraph is a self-defeating attempt. To say that he has been the greatest French scholar of Islam of the 20th century is, in a way, reductive and to some extent it misses the point. The '*cheikh admirable*' – as his major biography published so far effectively calls him[74] – was not only the great scholar, whose monumental four-volume work on the Bagdad martyr mystique al Hallâj is regarded as one of the great academic researches of the 20th century. He was also, as Christian Jambet has rightly pointed out in an important recently published collection of Massignon's writings:

> a pioneer in the domain of art and Christian spirituality … a complex character: a major witness of the French colonial empire, then a man engaged in the struggles of the peoples for their independence; a believer of the religion of Abraham, attached to the unique virtue of the Jewish people as well as to the inalienable rights of the Arab victims of the partition of Palestine.[75]

When one reads the pages Said devotes to Louis Massignon, one feels that the theoretical machinery of *Orientalism* is slipping. Leaving aside the specific assessment put forward

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73. See James Clifford and James Brown for reviews of *Orientalism* that have stressed the problematic nature of Said's interpretation of Massignon: respectively, 'Review of Orientalism', *History and Theory* 19, no. 2 (1980): 204–23; and 'The Solitude of Edward Said: The Fate of Gibb, Lane and Massignon in *Orientalism*', *Economy and Society* 28, no. 4 (1999): 550–69.

74. Christian Destremau and Jean Moncelon, *Louis Massignon: le 'cheikh admirable'* (Lectoure: Le Capucin, 2005).

75. Louis Massignon, *Ècrits Mémorables*, 2 vols (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2009), quotation by Christian Jambet, back cover.

by Said of Massignon's scholarship, something that would require a different direction of research, what the discussion reveals more broadly is Said's scepticism of the possibility (and even political opportunity) of a dialogue of civilisation. For Massignon, the dialogical approach was the foundation of his scholarly and political engagement.[76] In a way that neatly resembles the Gadamerian hermeneutics of dialogue as a 'fusion of horizons', Massignon argued that:

> 'To understand something is not to annex it, it is to transfer by decentring oneself [*par décentrement*] to the heart of the other … the essence of language should be a kind of decentring. We can make ourselves understood only by entering the system of the other'.[77]

This decentring implies for Massignon what he calls a 'science of compassion'. This is about living and sharing the sufferings and the aspirations for justice of the Other, and it is based on what he has guarded as the main existential lesson from his encounter with Islam, '*l'hospitalité sacrée*', the sacred hospitality towards the stranger and in particular the weak and the poor.[78]

For Said, who at times acknowledges and praises Massignon's tireless engagement in favour of the Islamic civilisation – 'one would be foolish not to respect the sheer genius and novelty of Massingon's mind'[79] – this sympathetic approach was nevertheless part of the problem and instrumental to that 'summational attitude' which was ultimately about making a relatively uncomplicated statement about the Orient as a whole;[80] to the point that he could say that:

> 'seen in such a way, Massignon is less mythologized "genius" than he is a kind of system for producing certain kinds of statements, disseminated into the large mass of discursive formations that together make up the archive, or cultural material, of his time'.[81]

Here I cannot discuss in depth the reasons why this reading of Massignon is problematic, but one element seems to me important to outline: Massignon was indeed committed to the search of the originality and authenticity of civilisational and religious phenomenologies as he believed that the fact that world civilisations were the product of borrowings and encounters, what he even called syncretism, did not imply the lack of a 'fundamental originality', which was actually discernible in the way those borrowed and exchanged elements had been ordered and organised.[82]

Such an idea of a 'fundamental originality' is unquestionably a form of essentialism too far away from Said's intellectual references. Such a search, however, was for Massignon an important dimension of his scholarly engagement and actually an integral

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76. See the collection of essays presented at UNESCO in 1992 on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of Massignon's death entitled *Louis Massignon et le dialogue des cultures* (Paris: Les Éditions du CERF, 1996).
77. Louis Massignon, 'L'involution sémantique dans les cultures sémitiques', *Opera Minora*, vol. II (Paris: Presse Universitaire de France, 1969), 631.
78. Louis Massignon, *L hospitalité sacrée*, ed. Jacques Keryell (Paris: Nouvelle cité, 1987).
79. Said, *Orientalism*, 269.
80. Ibid., 255.
81. Ibid., 274.
82. Louis Massignon, 'Interprétation de la civilisation arabe dans la culture française', *Opera Minora*, vol. I, 187–202.

part of that journey between Self and Other, leading to discovery of that deeper 'unity in diversity'. And how could it have been otherwise for that young adult atheist who had been converted to his original faith, Christianity, through the encounter with Islam? That man to whom, as he used to narrate in his old age, God spoke first of all in Arabic? In a sketchy and evocative way, the deep anchorage of Massignon into his Catholic faith and his cultural community of destiny, France, was never an obstacle to reaching a higher level of universality, but was rather the necessary precondition for a transgressive creative journey. This was similarly the case with his elaboration of a theology of Abrahamic religions, whose impact on the recent history of Christianity and Muslim–Christian relationships has already been very significant and whose daring intellectual insights and *élan* are still far from having exhausted their potential.[83]

But these were the arguments of someone who has also been described as a mystic and whose views arguably resonated at a different level, though not incompatible it seems to me, with Said's secular humanism. The very same divergence appears if we compare Said's post-9/11 critical remarks on a dialogue of civilisations and his defence of a secular politics of reason, with Massignon's reply almost 50 years before 9/11 – formulated to oppose the thesis of a coming clash of cultures of his time. In 1952, in the twilight of the French colonial experience, Massignon had written an essay for *Politique Étrangère*, the reference review for the French foreign policy community, which was recently republished in 2006 on the occasion of the 70th anniversary issue of this journal. As the title of this essay – 'L'Occident devant l'Orient: Primauté d'une solution culturelle' ('The West facing the East: The Primacy of a Cultural Solution')[84] – makes clear beyond all doubt, in front of a potential clash between the European and the Muslim worlds at the time of the decolonisation struggle, for Massignon the priority and primacy should be given to a cultural solution, 'a solution of justice possible by means of *exemplary* names and maxims of *wisdom*; which the instincts of the masses understand'.[85]

In other words and in striking contrast to Said's argument, we need not escape into a realm of entirely universal maxims, but rather excavate even more profoundly into the fundamental originality of our different traditions, through a sympathetic dialogue, to find that justice which, whether in the colonial era or in the postcolonial predicament, can deeply resonate as authentic and true justice in the peoples' collective psychologies. Here it is clear that Massignon was also thinking of the hugely *exemplary* and influential role of Gandhi, who he admired and whose *wisdom* and 'poor means' to the service of Truth – non-violence, prayer and fasting – became more and more important in the last part of his life.[86] Therefore, in 'diverging agreement', Massignon and Said oppose the thesis of an inescapable 'clash of civilisations', acknowledge the risks of a dangerous 'clash of ignorance' and support the need to highlight and politicise the centrality of

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83. Here I would like to mention those hugely erudite and amazing texts known as 'The Three Prayers of Abraham' that Massignon revised throughout all his life, from his return to Christianity in 1908 to his death in 1962, but which were only fully published a few years ago thanks to the editorial work of his son Daniel Massignon; see Louis Massignon, *Les trois prières d'Abraham* (Paris: Les Éditions du CERF, 1997).

84. Louis Massignon, 'L'Occident devant l'Orient: Primauté d'une solution culturelle (1952)', *Politique Étrangère* no.4 (2006): 1033–8.

85. Ibid., 1038, my translation and my italics.

86. Louis Massignon, 'L'exemplarité singulière de Gandhi', *Opera Minora*, vol. III, 354–62. Guy Harpigny has talked of a 'Gandhian cycle' with reference to the last period of Massignon's life; see *Islam et christianisme selon Louis Massignon* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Service d'impression de l'Université catholique, 1981).

civilisational encounters. But for Massignon the solution has still to be found within the cultural horizons of civilisational traditions – these vast and rich repositories of all human wisdom – in a spirit of dialogue, at the same time respectful of a true cultural pluralism and open to the search of a new 'unity in diversity'.

Conclusions

As Hedley Bull argued, the emergence of a multicultural international society imperatively requires a *new normative structure* since 'we have … to recognise that the nascent cosmopolitan culture of today, like the international society which it helps to sustain, is weighted in favour of the dominant cultures of the West'.[87] The political discourse of dialogue of civilisations is meant to address this imbalance by reopening and redefining the core Western-centric and mainly liberal assumptions upon which the normative structure of the contemporary international society is based. Today a critical precondition for such a course is to learn from Said's lesson on the political implications of the Self–Other distinctions. In this respect, civilisational dialogue and the critique of *Orientalism* converge in criticising the construction of the Self through an opposition to a negative-valued, dangerous or threatening Other, while also calling for the need to overcome the Eurocentric matrix of contemporary international society and the need to decolonise our global imaginary.

The critiques of Sen and Said, however, fail to grasp the broader picture, meaning and working logics of the reassertion of civilisations as *strategic frames of references* of international politics. This is, I have argued, the result of their implicit endorsement of the 'Westphalian' presumption as well as of a set of problematic assumptions on secularism and tradition – all too European! – which have recently come under serious scrutiny. Civilisational (and religious) discourses are not necessarily a conflict-generating factor: the political discourse of dialogue of civilisations tries to retrieve and mobilise the normative resources more conducive to a peaceful and just world. Is this a wishful-thinking exercise? Or, in the poignant words of Said, is it not 'better to think in terms of powerful and powerless communities … than to wander off in search of vast abstractions that may give momentary satisfaction but little self-knowledge or informed analysis'?[88] Possibly, but it seems to me that to engage in civilisational politics – constructively and in a dialogical mode – is today more *realistically* appropriate to the epoch-making changes of the international system in its ideological and power structures, that is, for an international society that is becoming multipolar and multi-civilisational. Much of Western and Enlightenment-inspired international thought struggles to make sense of and accept this new international predicament.

Dialogue as fusion of horizons is an open-ended process, which frequently involves difficulties, and there is no guarantee that it can produce a cross-cultural consensus; it raises, however, the reasonable hope to foster mutual understanding if the parties approach it with a genuine attitude open to reciprocal learning. Such mutual understanding is already in great need today to avoid what Said rightly feared as a threatening 'clash

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87.   Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London, Macmillan, 1977), 305.
88.   See Debray, 'God and the Political Planet', 35.

of ignorance'. But in my argument, dialogue of civilisations goes even beyond that by endorsing Taylor's notion of 'presumption of worth', that is, the idea that every long-lived civilisation has, to use Gadamer's words, something distinctive to offer for the solidarity and welfare of humanity.[89] Dialogue of civilisations calls to *practically* enter into this inter-civilisational dialogical encounter so as to create, in Gadamer's words, these 'new normative and common solidarities that let practical reason speak again' in a way that is appropriate to the new global predicament.[90] The argument -and hope- here is that, in Khatami's words, every dialogue, based on a presumption of the worth of the Other, 'provides grounds for human creativity to flourish'.[91]

This human creativity was at work in an extraordinary way in Massignon whose openness to dialogue or, even better, whose dialogical life-journey, laid the foundations to turn upside-down centuries of misunderstanding and mistrust between Christianity, Islam and Judaism: his theology of the sacred hospitality of the Abrahamic faiths has opened the possibility for the three faiths to inhabit a shared perspective without renouncing their fundamental originality. This is why, in diverging agreement with Said, I have argued that Massignon's work and life stand as a very concrete proof – a true paradigmatic icon – of the possibility of a 'dialogue of civilisations' that escapes the yoke of the orientalist accusations and dares to speak its own name even in less welcoming academic contexts.

Acknowledgements

Author Biography

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89. Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition', in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25–73. Taylor recognises that the presumption of worth involves 'something like an act of faith' about a world where different cultures complement each other (p. 66).

90. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1981), 87.

91. See n. 9.