Dialogue for Peace and Harmony:

A Human Sciences Approach[1]

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Introduction

THIS paper discusses the role of the human sciences in dialogue. The type of dialogue I am concerned with that which concerns the relations between different religious and ethnic groups. The goal of such dialogue is to minimize conflicts between groups and to strive towards achieving peace and harmony among them. Dialogue can be defined in terms of a conversation on a subject of mutual interest between two or more individuals or groups whose beliefs are defined by differing and even opposing worldviews. The most supreme aim of dialogue is to bring about interest, understanding, appreciation, and even compassion for the religions, cultures and worldviews of others. This paper deals with how the human sciences can have a role in developing such a dialogue. The role of the human sciences is essentially a preventive one. It involves engaging the other group continuously dialogue in order to both minimize the potential for confrontation and conflict as well as achieve understanding and appreciation.

This paper focusses on what I understand to be the necessary preconditions for dialogue among religions. Dialogue among religions is particularly important at this juncture in time when the various religions of the world are facing some common problems. There is a wide spread view that religions are the causes of much conflict in the world today. On the other hand, experience tells us that the worst cases of genocide in recent history took place in the name of secular ideologies, namely, fascism, liberal democracy, and socialism. Examples are the Nazi mass murder of Jews during World War II, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the mass killings under Stalin and Polpot. Of course, it would be as illogical to conclude that it is secularism that is the cause of such genocide, as it is to conclude that secularism is the reason behind religious harmony. I feel it necessary to clarify these distinctions because of a dominant perception that it is religion which is the cause of many problems. There is a view which is founded on the notion that

religion breeds intolerance. It is more accurate to say that all belief systems are corruptible and can be perverted and that there are specific social and historical conditions that result in these perversions. It is vital that dialogue functions to correct such misconceptions.

However, in order for the human sciences to have a role in such dialogue, there are certain problems that the human sciences have that need to be overcome. This has to do with the problem of Eurocentrism.

The Problem of Eurocentrism

The Muslim world had been in conflict with what is now referred to as the West for centuries. In the 8th Century there was the Arab conquest of Spain and Sicily. The Arabs ruled over Spain for 700 years and were in Sicily for 500 years. There were also the wars of the so-called Crusades that took place over a period of about 200 years. The Ottoman Turks ruled over parts of Europe and laid Vienna to siege. After Europe and America became militarily and culturally dominant over the Muslims, Muslim civilization continued to constitute a threat and a problem in the form of anti-colonial and other types of movements following political independence. Therefore, the feeling of mistrust and suspicion can be found both in the West and in Muslim societies.

The need for dialogue between Muslims and the West is clear. More than a decade ago, the United Nations Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations was proclaimed.[2] In order for dialogue to be successful, it is necessary that there be no prejudices that are harboured by the various parties involved. In the case of public discourse on Islam there are certainly prejudicial views about Islam that are widely expressed. This is the case in both the print as well as electronic media. At the root of this problem is that of Eurocentrism in the human sciences. It is this Eurocentrism that eventually influences the views towards Islam that are expressed in the media and affect the public's perception.

To provide an example of this, I would like to discuss the work of Joachim Matthes (2000) on the concept of religion. This concerns the translation of terms rooted in a particular religious tradition into universal social scientific concepts. Concepts in the human sciences originate from a particular culture and may present problems when brought into scientific discussions about geographies and times outside of those of their origins. This may result in the distortion of the phenomena that they are meant to explain and understand.

Matthes discusses this with reference to the concept of religion. The Latin term *religio*, from which the English "religion" is derived, referred

to the many practices and cults of Rome in pre-Christian times. With the emergence of Christianity as the dominant belief, other systems were either absorbed or eliminated. Christianity was the only *religio*, although the term was often not applied as there was no need to. Christianity was the only legitimate belief and was simply known as the Church. With the onset of the Protestant Reformation, *religio* came to refer to Christian beliefs and practices separate from the institution of the Catholic Church. In other words, it was the religion of laypeople. Religion, however, still referred to Christianity and not to other faiths. This was to gradually change. Jean Bodin, the French philosopher, published his *Colloquium Heptaplomeres* (*Colloquium of the Seven about the Secrets of the Sublime*) in 1953. Here we find a more universal understanding of "religion" which included non-Christian faiths. From the eighteenth century on "religion" came to be used more as a scientific concept in philosophy, anthropology, history and sociology, and referred to faiths other than Christianity.

What is interesting however is that while "religion" encompassed of faiths and not just Christianity, when European scholars wrote about non-Christian religions, they did so with Protestantism or Catholicism in mind. In other words, there was a tendency to view other religions through the lens of Christianity. This involved the implicit or explicit comparison with Christianity, resulting in an elision of reality. To help us understand the problem, Matthes draws out attention to the logic of comparison. When we make comparisons the two things to be compared are subsumed under a third category or term which is at a higher level of abstraction. For instance, apples and grapes are subsumed under fruits. The third term "Fruits" is the *tertium comparationis*. If we compare Christianity and Islam, the *tertium comparationis* is religion. Obviously, the *tertium comparationis* should be a more general term whose characteristics are not derived from one particular religion. But, this is not the case. In many disciplines, the characteristics of the concept of religion are derived from Christianity to begin with. Therefore, the supposedly general scientific concept "religion" is intellectually or culturally defined by Christianity. The result is that other religions such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are seen through the lens of Christianity rather than compared to Christianity in terms of a more general *tertium comparationis*, that is, a genuinely universal concept "religion".

What elision of reality is caused by this mis-comparison? What distortions of non-Christian religions result from a less than universal *tertium comparationis*? One example is from the literature on Protestant Islam. This literature attempts to draw parallels between the Protestant

Reformation and the modern Muslim revival since the nineteenth century. The impression is given that the goals of the modern Muslims revivalists were similar to those who participated in the revolt against the Catholic Church.[3]

Another example comes from Buddhism. Herbrechtsmeier, in saying that Buddhism is largely devoid of the belief in supernatural beings, also said that it has all the other features of religion such as temples, ritual practices, a sacred canon, pilgrimage sites, reverence for saints, and priest-monks (Herbrechtsmeier, 1993: 7). The claim that the Theravada *dharma* (central teachings) is derived from a superhuman Buddha is a distortion of Buddhism because it is not Buddha's being superhuman but his being transcendental, referring to the residing of his transcendental spirit in the teachings or *dharma*, that makes the *dharma* valid (Herbrechtsmeier, 1993: 11). Herbrechtsmeier suggests that Western scholars often brought in ideas of religion into non-Western contexts that do not fit the experience and understanding of the peoples that they study, resulting in the etic concept of religion not allowing for a empathic and non-distorted understanding of the variety of emic religious phenomena outside of the West. An example is the Western association of religion with worship of supernatural beings (Herbrechtsmeier,1993: 1).

Yet another example comes from Hinduism. According to Smith, Hinduism is a particularly false conceptualization, one that is conspicuously incompatible with any adequate understanding of the religious outlook of the Hindus. Even the term 'Hindu' [an Indian or non-Muslim inhabitant of India] was unknown to the classical Hindus. 'Hinduism' as a concept they certainly did not have" (Smith, 1964: 61, cited in Frykenberg, 1989: 102, n. 3). The term 'Hindu' has its origins in antiquity as the Indo-Aryan name of the river Indus, which is its Greek transliteration (Smith, 1964: 249, n. 46, cited in Frykenberg, 1989: 83)[4]. It is from this usage that the terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' gradually acquired their descriptive and geographical denotations. Muslim scholars such as Abū Rayhan al-Biruni (A.D. 973–1048), writing in Arabic, used the term *al-Hind* to refer to the Indian subcontinent, but when they referred to the people of that subcontinent or aspects thereof they were referring to what they considered the indigenous and non-Muslim inhabitants of India. In Persian and Urdu the corresponding geographical term to *al-Hind* was *Hindustan* Things *Hindustani* referred to whatever that was indigenous to India and non-Muslim (Frykenberg, 1989: 84). The English 'Hindu' probably derived from the Persian. The term "Hindu" appears in the *Gaudiya Vaisnava* texts of the sixteenth

century (O'Connell, 1973: 340–3, cited in Frykenberg, 1989: 84), probably as a result of Muslim influence. The usage here is consistent with that in the Muslim texts of the premodern Arabs and Persians. Even in the modern period, this negative definition of Hinduism is found as evident in the Hindu Marriage Act. The Act defines a Hindu, among other things, as one "who is not a Muslim, Christian, Parsi or Jew by religion…" (Derrett, 1963: 18–19).

The terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' in reference to religion, and a unitary one at that, was for the most part, a modern development. In the eighteenth century it began to be used to denote an Aryan, Brahmanical or Vedic-based high culture and religion by European Orientalists such as Halhed, Jones and Müller (Frykenberg, 1989: 85–86). It is this usage that was adopted by the early Indian nationalists themselves like Ramohun Roy, Gandhi and Nehru (Frykenberg, 1989: 86). This 'new' religion was founded on the ontology and epistemology contained in the *Varnasramadharma* and encompassed the entire cosmos, detailing as part of its vision a corresponding stratified social structure (Frykenberg, 1989: 86).

What is important in these developments as far as the intellectual Christianization of Indian beliefs systems is concerned is that (i) the belief systems of the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent (excluding Muslims, Jews, Christians and Parsis) came to be regarded as religion; (ii) these beliefs systems were seen to constitute a single religion; and (iii) were founded on a system of Brahmanical doctrines based on the *Catur-Veda* (Four Vedas) (Frykenberg, 1989: 86). It is in these senses that characteristics of Christianity were read into Indian beliefs.

What is the problem with this tendency to intellectually Christianise other religions? First of all, there is the imposition of categories from the outside. Categories such as "religion" or "Hinduism", imposed from the outside, that is, by European scholars, result in constructions that do not accord with the self-description of the communities concerned. This results in the curious mix of fact and fiction. The beliefs of peoples such as those of Muslims, Buddhists and of people of the Indian subcontinent are not understood according to the self-understanding of these peoples. Facts are mixed in with accounts that are a result of the imagination of European scholars determined by the a framework that is derived from Christian categories posing as the *tertium comparationis*.

The intellectual Christianisation of other religions can be said to be an instance of Eurocentrism in the human sciences. The conceptual vocabulary often used to talk about non-Christian religions is often derived from Christianity. Terms like church, sect, denomination, cult

and religion itself are widely used in discusions and research on other religions to the point that concepts internal to these traditions are marginalised. For example, a term like fundamentalism that originated in discussions on Christianity has been used to talk about Muslim extremism while the Muslims' own conceptualization of the problem has yet to enter the vocabulary of the social scientists, journalists and policy analysts.

The problem persists because of the phenmenon of what Syed Hussein Alatas called the captive mind. In the captive mind, there is an "unreality of basic assumptions, misplaced abstraction, ignorance or misinterpretation of data, and an erroneous conception of problems and their significance" in social science (Alatas 1972, 11). The captive mind is not creative and does not have the ability to raise original problems. Furthermore, it is alienated from its own national traditions and is dominated by Western ideas (Alatas, 1974: 691).

It is therefore important that the problem of Eurocentrism be addressed in order for dialogue to progress. One important area of action in which the issue of Eurocentrism can be dealt with is education.

Teaching against Eurocentrism and Preparing for Dialogue

It is vital that in our teaching in of the various human sciences in the universities of Asia and Africa we become more conscious of the problem of Eurocentrism. This would result in effort to introduce more Asian and African thinkers into the curricula. This was the logic that I have followed in various courses that I teach at the National University of Singapore. One was entitled Social Thought and Social Theory. In this course, co-taught for many years with my colleague, Vineeta Sinha, the works of thinkers such as Ibn Khaldun,[5] Rammohun Roy,[6] Jose Rizal,[7] Benoy Kumar Sarkar,[8] and Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728)[9] were taught in addition to those of Marx, Weber and Durkheim.[10]

I followed a similar logic in another course I taught, "Development and Social Change". The aim of this course was to understand the different reasons for which peoples' lives in so many parts of the world are affected in one way or another by poverty, income inequality, low levels of education, corruption, political oppression, and other features of underdevelopment. The complexity of the development process can be grasped from the multitude of explanations that have emerged since the nineteenth century and include those from India such as D. Naoroji who wrote at the turn of the last century (1962 [1901]) and the Indian Marxist M. N. Roy (1971 [1922]).

The purpose behind such changes to the courses or curriculum lies in the need to educate people about the multicultural origins of modern civilization, about the contributions of the Muslims, Indians and Chinese to modern Europe, about the positive aspects of all these civilizations, and about the common values and problems that humanity shares. A course on World Religions should be introduced to the schools. Children should not be learning only about their own religions but about all religions. Apart from having such a subject, the theme of inter-religious experience can be reflected in other subjects such as social studies, literature, geography and history. All this would require a serious relook at the curricula of schools and universities.

Because of the relative autonomy that university professors enjoy, we are in a position to make such changes in the courses that we teach, even if entire curricula cannot be revamped along these lines. I have also attempted to put into practice some themes that I believe should inform the dialogue among civilization in a course entitled "Islam and Contemporary Muslim Civilizations".

This is an introductory course to Muslim civilization. Emphasis is on the historical, cultural and social context of the emergence and development of Islam, and the great diversity that exists in the Muslim world, from Morocco in the west to Indonesia in the east. The course is divided into five sections. The first, consisting of two lectures, provides an introduction to the study of civilizations in general, defines Islam as belief and practice, creed and civilization, and briefly discusses the origins of Islam. The next set of lectures discusses the spread of Islam and the encounter between Islam and the West in the past. This part of the course introduces the major cultural areas within Muslim civilization, that is, the Arab, Persian, Ottoman, Moghul, and Malay, and covers topics such as the Muslim conquest of Spain and Sicily, the Crusades, and the Islamization of Southeast Asia. The third part of the course examines the cultural dimension of Muslim civilization, with particular emphasis placed on the religious and rational sciences that developed among the Arabs and Persians, their contact with the Greek heritage, and the impact that Islam had on medieval European philosophy and science. Also discussed in this part of the course are the literary and artistic dimensions of Muslim civilization. The fourth part of the course focuses on current issues in the contemporary period (post-World War II). Particular emphasis is given to the emergence of Orientalism in Europe and the Islamic response to it. This section also provides an overview of the political economy of the Muslim world, setting the stage for discussions on a number of contemporary problems

and issues such as gender, underdevelopment, Islamic revivalism, and imperialism.

While a great deal of information is covered in the course, its objective was to achieve more than that. It was necessary to cover a lot of historical facts and expose the students to a wide variety of readings on Muslim history, society, literature and the arts in order to introduce to them the three central themes of the study of civilizations. There are as follows:

1. Intercivilizational encounters. The study of Islam is one case of encounter between civilizations. As Islam was the only civilization to have conquered the West and to be in continuous conflict with West, it is important that people be introduced to the idea that such civilizational encounters are not always negative. The Crusades, for example, resulted in a great deal of scientific and cultural borrowings between the Muslims and the Europeans. A wonderful example of such an encounter is the meeting between St. Francis and Sultan Malik al-Kāmil.[11]

2. Multicultural origins of modernity. Modern civilization is usually defined in Western terms. But many aspects of modern civilization come from Islam and other civilizations, including the sciences, the arts, cuisine, commercial techniques, and so on.[12] The university is a fine example. The notion of the university as a degree granting institution of learning was developed and put into practice by the Muslims by the tenth century and adopted by the Europeans in the thirteenth century. For example, the *ijazah* was the principles means by which scholars and Sufis passed on their teachings to students, granting them permission to carry on their teachings. Although the learned scholars of Islam taught in formal institutions of learning such as the *maktab*, the *kuttab*, the *madrasah* and the *jami`ah*, the degree was personally granted by the scholar to the student. The *ijazah* is the origin of the European university degree or license.[13]

3. The variety of points of view. The study of Islam provides us with an opportunity to experience the multiplicity of perspectives from which any one fact or event can be viewed. For example, most works on the Crusades provide accounts from the point of view of the European crusaders. The perspective of Muslims who fought the crusaders and then lived amongst them when European soldiers settled in and around the Holy Land between Crusades is instructive as it helps complete the picture of an otherwise fragmented reality. Another example of this concerns the *hijab* or head covering worn by many Muslim women. While in some settings it co-exists with the oppression of women, in others it is a symbol of liberation. It is important, for example, to expose

students to the experiences of Muslim women who took to the *hijab* in order to escape the critical gaze of the fashion and beauty industry.

Conclusion

The idea of the intellectual Christianization of "religion" presupposes a more general notion of constructions of which the former is a type. This general notion is based on the critique of Orientalism by Edward Said. Said describes Orientalism as not just a learned field or discipline, but a "theoretical stage affixed to Europe". The Orientalist, like a dramatist who puts together the drama, constructs images of the Orient in a way that betrays the influence of the history and cultural climate of his society (Said, 1979: 63). Orientalism represents more Western knowledge of the Orient rather than true discourse about the Orient (Said, 1979: 6, 63). Said makes a distinction between early or pre-modern Orientalism and modern Orientalism. Pre-modern Orientalism, formally beginning in 1312 as a result of the establishment of chairs in Arabic, Greek, Hebrew and Syriac at universities in Avignon, Bologna, Oxford, Paris and Salamanca (Said, 1979: 49–50), was articulated and elaborated by prominent European authors such as Ariosto, Milton, Marlowe, Tasso, Shakespeare, Cervantes and others, all of whom helped sharpen the image of the Orient (Said, 1979: 63).

Early Orientalism was not simply ignorant of the Orient, it was characterised by a complex ignorance of the Orient (Southern, 1962: 14, cited in Said, 1979: 55). The image of the Orient was not only far from reality but also complex. The Orient was seen to be hostile to Europe but also weak and defeated, although always a threat, in contrast to a powerful Europe that speaks on her behalf, as when Aeschylus has the Persian queen speak rather than the Persians speaking on their own volition (Aeschylus, 1970, cited in Said, 1979: 57). Said makes a very interesting point about early Orientalism. In the encounter between East and West the Orient neither remains as something completely novel to the Occident nor as something completely well-known. Instead a "new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things seen for the first times as versions of a previously known thing" (Said, 1979: 58–59). And example of a new thing was Islam, at least to medieval Europeans, which was gradually dealt with by being considered as a fake version of something known, that is, Christianity (Said, 1979: 59). Here said is speaking of the European Christian view of Islam which developed and spread in poetry, scholarly controversies and popular superstitions (Said, 1979: 61).[14]

It can be said, therefore, that the role of the human sciences in the dialogue among civilizations covers a number of areas:

1.   the participation in and monitoring of public discourse with the objective of breaking stereotypes and unsettling commonly held notions that typically translate into prejudiced views.

2.   The formal education of the public at all levels, that is, primary, secondary and tertiary education, in such as way that the three themes mentioned above, that is, intercivilizational encounters, the multicultural origins of modernity and the variety of points of view, inform the development of curricula. In order for this to be done on the basis of a sound intellectual basis, there must be serious efforts to develop adequate *tertium comparationis*.

3.   Greater interaction among social scientists in the Asia and African regions and more support to journals and other scientific publications that are produced out of these regions.

In order for dialogue among religions, particularly between the West and other Civilizations, to be facilitated it goes without saying that serious inroads must be made in the trafficking of stereotypes by the media, which in turn are influenced by the extent to which education is Orientalist or Eurocentric. This is because the media and public discourse are influenced directly or indirectly by knowledge that is produced in tertiary education. Therefore, the problem has to be dealt with at the level of knowledge production in these institutions, that is, teaching and research. This would then mean that there should be greater interaction among social scientists in Asia and Africa.

The experience and example of St. Francis of Assisi is truly something to be admired and taught. The Sultan had invited St. Francis to visit a mosque where he asked St. Francis to pray for him as he would for St. Francis. St. Francis saw the humanity of Islam and indeed modified his preconceptions of the Sultan's religion (Bonaventura, 1260/1950: 361–363).[15] St. Francis had entered into a true spirit of dialogue with Islam and was sincere about the positive values that were to be found in that religion to the point of being inspired. For example, after witnessing the *adhan* or call to prayers in Egypt, St. Francis suggested his people should praise and thank God every sunset after the appropriate signal by herald or some other way is given (Wintz, 2003). The case of St. Francis and the Sultan clearly illustrates what results from a realization of the true spirit of dialogue.

Notes

¹ This article draws from a previous piece of mine. See Alatas (2002)
² See http://www.un.org/Dialogue/
³ For more on the problem of Protestant Islam, see Alatas (2007).
⁴ Smith's source is Spiegel (1881, Vol. 1, lines 17–18, A, line 25: 50, 54, 246).
⁵ Ibn KhaldÉn (1967).
⁶ Roy (1906).
⁷ Alatas (2011).
⁸ Sarkar (1937[1985]).
⁹ On Ogyū Sorai see Najita, 1998
¹⁰ For a discussion of the course, see Alatas & Sinha (2001).
¹¹ See Moses (2009).
¹² For example, by the middle of the thirteenth century almost all the philosophical writings of Ibn Rushd had been translated into Latin. A peculiarly Christian appropriation of Ibn Rushd began to develop in Europe and came to be known as Latin Averroism, establishing itself in various European universities such as Bologna, Padua and Paris (O'Leary, 1939: 290–291, 294).
¹³ See Guillaume (1931); Ebied and Young (1974).
¹⁴ See also Comfort (1940, cited in Said, 1979: 61, n. 40).
¹⁵ Sermon at Christ Church, Freemantle, Southampton, St. Francis of Assisi Day, celebrated on 10 October 2004 http://www.cms.hampshire.org.uk/livingwater/francis-islam.htm accessed 5 August 2013.

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