

# Universities, Religions, and the Encounter of Civilizations

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## The Challenge

As civilizations encounter each other and become ever more intimately intertwined, their relationships can range from cooperation to competition to hostile rivalry. The late political scientist Samuel P. Huntington famously expressed the challenge of “the clash of civilizations.”<sup>1</sup> Huntington commented on the relation between civilization and culture:

Civilization and culture both refer to the overall way of life of a people, and a civilization is a culture writ large. They both involve the ‘values, norms, institutions, and modes of thinking to which successive generations in a given society have attached primary importance.’ . . . A civilization is thus the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species.<sup>2</sup>

According to Huntington, civilizations have inherent tendencies to conflict with other civilizations. In the current post-Cold War situation, Huntington saw particularly strong conflicts emerging between what he called “the West” and Islam and China; and he challenged Americans to reaffirm and preserve their Western identity against rivals.<sup>3</sup> Huntington assumed that there is a fundamentally adversarial relationship among civilizations and thought in terms of threat and response. The bloody history of empires does indeed witness to the ambiguity of civilizations. Civilizations have repeatedly extended their sway through military conquests and maintained order over subdued populations through the threat of brute force. Great political and cultural achievements have often come at the price of brutal conquests.

Huntington also stressed the central role of religions in shaping the world’s civilizations; indeed, civilizations live on the basis of their respective religious heritages. Here again he saw inherent tendencies of religions to conflict with other religious traditions. The history of the world’s religions is indeed deeply intertwined with the history of civilizations.<sup>4</sup> Governing authorities in pre-modern cultures legitimated their power through religious claims such as the divine right of kings in European history or the Mandate of Heaven in imperial China. Precisely because religions express humanity’s deepest beliefs, hopes, and commitments, they can channel tremendous power for good or for ill. Religions propose noble ideals of humanity and generosity, and they have time and time again called forth the greatest levels of sanctity, generosity, and commitment to the point of self-sacrifice. They have also repeatedly been used and abused to justify and reinforce patterns of violence, including the conquest of other peoples and the subordination of selected groups. The legacies of the world’s religions are marked by repeated conflicts and persecutions.<sup>5</sup> Religions have justified slavery, racism, and unjust relationships among classes.<sup>6</sup> Religiously motivated violence continues to be a scourge in many areas today.<sup>7</sup> Religion has played such an influential role in

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<sup>1</sup> *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone Book, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Huntington, 41, 43.

<sup>3</sup> Huntington, 20-21.

<sup>4</sup> John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching, and Todd Lewis, *World Religions Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Selengut, *Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence* (Walnut Creek, CA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Forrest G. Wood, *The Arrogance of Faith: Christianity and Race in America from the Colonial Era to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman And Littlefield Publishers, 1999)

civilizations past and present that it requires serious scholarly attention and judicious critical discernment.

Universities study the complex intersections of civilizations and religions; universities with a religious heritage live and negotiate their identities at the meeting points of civilizations and religions. Universities are communities for reflection on the ambiguous heritage of the world's civilizations and religions, for understanding the relations among them today, and for the production of new knowledge and skills shaping the future. For better or worse, universities can play a vital role in shaping the relationships among civilizations. Knowledge gives power, and power is ambiguous.<sup>8</sup> Universities can be places of ever deeper multilateral understanding and also places where ever more effective weapons, both intellectual and military, are invented and developed. As the world's civilizations encounter each other ever more closely and intensely, there are fresh opportunities for cooperation and dialogue and also acute challenges and dangers. As civilizations vie with each other for prominence, prestige, and wealth, amicable competition can all too easily become hostile rivalry.

Universities can play an important role in cultivating a constructive dialogue among civilizations or they can buttress cultural, political, and military programs of conquest and domination. The history of the acquisition and exercise of power by civilizations is deeply ambiguous. The world's religious traditions have shared actively in this ambiguity for centuries, and during the modern period, universities have been intimately involved in these struggles.

### The Ambiguous Role of Reason

Universities claim to bring reason to bear on the issues and dilemmas of human experience, but reason has an ambiguous history. Philosophers of the European Enlightenment had high expectations that an age of reason could resolve problems and conflicts of past epochs.<sup>9</sup> While modern science and technology offered many benefits, the shadow side of the European Enlightenment lay in the conquests of other civilizations and cultures by European Empires. The optimism of European reason often came at the price of the humiliation of other cultures. Theologian Paul Tillich believed that in the wake of the European Enlightenment reason denied its finitude, deified itself in the philosophy of Hegel, and then collapsed: "The fall of a deified reason after Hegel contributed decisively to the enthronement of technical reason in our time and to the loss of the universality and the depth of ontological reason."<sup>10</sup> Paul Tillich analyzed the danger of modern reason being limited to technical reason; modern Western culture risks losing touch with what Tillich called ontological reason.<sup>11</sup> Ontological reason for Tillich "can be defined as the structure of the mind which enables it to grasp and to shape reality. . . . The depth of reason is the expression of something that is not reason but which precedes reason and is manifest through it."<sup>12</sup>

The Western intellectual situation is still marked by the collapse of the Hegelian synthesis, and contemporary thinkers have been profoundly aware of the ambiguity of reason and the dialectic of enlightenment, in which pure reason becomes unreasonable.<sup>13</sup> In response to both the exaltation of reason and the resulting skepticism after its collapse, philosopher Stephen Toulmin has reflected

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power*, ed. James D. Faugion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. vol. 3 of *Essential Works of Foucault* (New York: New Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1932, reprint 1969).

<sup>10</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Three Volumes in One*, vol. 1 (Chicago; University of Chicago Press and New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 82.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society*, ed. J. Mark Thomas (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1: 75, 79.

<sup>13</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

on the “Return to Reason” in a more modest, practical form. In place of the near obsession with “the concept of *rationality*,” Toulmin calls for sustained attention to “the complementary concept of *reasonableness*.”<sup>14</sup>

Reason in recent times has often been reduced to technical reason, the pursuit of means towards ends without any means of discussing the ends themselves. When technical reason is separated from ontological reason and cut off from the depth of reason, then reason becomes merely the search of means for ends and has no way to debate what ends should be sought. As a new global culture is emerging, it risks expressing largely the agendas and programs of multinational corporations for whom profit-making through production and consumption is the ultimate goal. Divorced from an ethical ground, reason can be corrupted by particular interests; systemic biases can exclude unwanted data and block unpleasant insights that would challenge established powers. The Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan warned of the flight from insight: “Besides the love of light, there can be a love of darkness. If prepossessions and prejudices notoriously vitiate theoretical investigations, much more easily can elementary passions bias understanding in practical and personal matters”; Lonergan named the systemic blindness of reason “scotosis.”<sup>15</sup> Lonergan believed that cultures and civilizations can engage in a self-correcting process of learning or they can close off threatening data in order to protect particular interests, leading to a cycle of decline.

Lonergan also noted an important shift in cultural awareness in recent times. Traditional civilizations usually assumed a normative understanding of culture according to which there was one culture toward which all humans should aspire; all other cultures were seen as inferior or defective in some way. Lonergan identified a more recent empirical notion of culture, which sees cultures as different in important ways without ranking one as normative for all others:

The classicist notion of culture was normative: at least *de jure* there was but one culture that was both universal and permanent; to its norms and ideals might aspire the uncultured, whether they were the young or the people or the natives or the barbarians. Besides the classicist, there also is the empirical notion of culture. It is the set of meanings and values that informs a way of life. It may remain unchanged for ages. It may be in process of slow development or rapid dissolution.<sup>16</sup>

As Lonergan warned, the biases of scholars can influence attitudes and actions far beyond the boundaries of the academy. Civilizations that adopt a defensive posture toward other cultures can isolate themselves from insights from other sources. While this may give a sense of security for a time, it may also lead to rigidity. Civilizations that are open to learning from other cultures can benefit from the wisdom of another culture’s angle of vision. A shared conversation holds out the hope of mutual correction.

Like Tillich and Lonergan, German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer rejected the reduction of reason to technology.<sup>17</sup> He proposed that experience is never completely captured in scientific formulas; experience opens peoples and cultures to experience of the new:

The nature of experience is conceived in terms of something that surpasses it; for experience itself can never be science. Experience stands in an ineluctable opposition to knowledge and to the kind of instruction that follows from general theoretical or technical knowledge. The truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience. . . . [T]he

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen Toulmin, *Return to Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 1, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, vol. 3 of *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 214-15.

<sup>16</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, vol. 14 of *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), xi.

<sup>17</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984).

experienced person proves to be . . . someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself.<sup>18</sup>

Gadamer's understanding of the nature of experience offers a philosophical basis for receiving and reflecting on the insights of different cultures and civilizations. When a civilization is too confident of its own finality and superiority, a powerful intervention from another culture may have a profound, even revolutionary impact. Early in the twentieth century, at the height of the epoch of European empires, Western art experienced the shock of learning from other cultures in two works of genius, "Les Femmes d'Alger" of Pablo Picasso and "The Rite of Spring" of Igor Stravinsky.<sup>19</sup> In each case, cultures that had been viewed as "primitive" were discovered to possess resources that could challenge and instruct the sophisticated culture of modern Europe.

### Universities as Sites for the Dialogue of Civilizations and Religions

A university is a community of scholars organized to pursue ongoing research, to contribute to the growth of knowledge and understanding, and to reflect critically on received ideas, assumptions and practices. A university strives to offer possibilities for advancement in every area of life, to educate the next generation of scholars, and to mentor students into becoming creative thinkers and leaders. Like the history of civilizations and religions, the role of universities is ambiguous. The encounter among civilizations can be hostile, ranging from prejudicial disdain to armed military conflict; in such contexts universities can either serve agendas of domination or can seek values that transcend individual and collective self-interest. Knowledge can be put to serve a nation's or a civilization's will to power. Indeed, the history of modern science is closely intertwined with the development of new military weapons, tactics, and strategies.<sup>20</sup> Universities claim to be places of objective pursuit of the truth; but they can also be active partners in what American President Dwight Eisenhower called the military-industrial complex, which developed in the United States during the Cold War.<sup>21</sup> Because of the sense of threat from the Soviet Union, American universities in this period received large sums of money from the United States government to finance military-related research. Universities can also offer new resources to their respective civilizations by questioning the reigning assumptions and exploring other perspectives.

A religious university pursues its mission of research and education in light of a particular religious heritage, with awareness of other religious traditions. The quality of any given religion's relationships with other religions will usually have a major impact upon the academic approach of the university itself. If the religion's attitudes towards other religions are dominated by polemics, the scholarship of the religiously affiliated university is likely to follow suit. If the religion's attitudes are more generous and hospitable, the religiously affiliated university will also likely follow that lead. Religious universities can, however, play a vital, creative role in challenging the received tradition, in questioning assumptions, in seeking new forms of dialogue in which the voices of other religions are heard with respect. There can be a healthy or unhealthy tension between the religious

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<sup>18</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed.; New York: Crossroad, 1989), 355.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Green, ed., *Picasso's 'Les Femmes d'Alger'*, Masterpieces of Western Art (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Peter Hill, *Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> James Ledbetter, *Unwarranted Influence: Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Military-Industrial Complex* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

university and the leadership of its tradition. Given the historical role of religion in contributing to inter-civilizational animosities and violence, the challenge to religious universities today to contribute to solutions is all the more pressing and intense.

In many traditions, an earlier model of apologetics would regularly take the most beautiful ideals of one's own tradition and sharply contrast them with the all-too-human, sinful practices of another religion, perceived to be an enemy. The earlier history of scholarship on other religions was all too often dominated by bitter polemics, ignorance, inaccurate stereotypes, and gross overgeneralizations.<sup>22</sup>

In the modern European university, there emerged a new discipline of the study of the world's religions in the middle of the nineteenth century, originally called *Religionswissenschaft* in German, a term variously translated in French as *sciences religieuses* and in English at an earlier time as "history of religions."<sup>23</sup> In American academic life today, the heir to this discipline is usually called religious studies.<sup>24</sup> The foundation of the discipline is usually attributed to Max Müller, a German scholar who learned Sanskrit and taught for many years at Oxford University in England. He issued the famous challenge, which echoes down to the present day: "Who knows one, knows none."<sup>25</sup> What he meant was that if we know only our own religious tradition, then we do not know what is distinctive about it and thus we really do not know what it is. It is like knowing only one language or one culture: we have no sense of what makes our language or our culture distinctive and thus do not fully appreciate our own identity. Müller sought to move beyond the negative religious stereotypes of the past and launched an influential series of translations of major religious texts from a wide variety of religious traditions. The discipline of religious studies in its various forms generally suspends any religious commitment and seeks a position of neutrality regarding ultimate questions of religious truth.

Another discipline, comparative theology, also seeks accurate understanding of other religions, but it engages in dialogue from the stance of a particular religious tradition. Comparative theology assumes that being deeply rooted in one particular tradition is not a barrier to understanding others but rather can serve as an opening to probe deeply the perspective and commitments of other communities. Comparative theology is self-involving and transformative because one can never be sure what the effect of the conversation will be.

In addressing the contemporary situation, universities can ponder the wisdom traditions of the world's religious civilizations, which challenge the reduction of reason to technological prowess. The biblical figure Job famously noted that humans can dig mines into mountains seeking physical jewels but queried, "But where does wisdom come from? And where is the place of understanding?" (Job 28:20) In various ways traditional civilizations all reflected on what Tillich called the depth of reason, on the idea of the good, and on what constitutes a good life beyond the immediate stimuli of pleasure, power, and profit. From various cultures around the world wisdom traditions emerged that pondered the ethical order in the universe. Wisdom traditions assume that living in harmony with this ethical order will bring satisfaction and happiness in the long run, even if it means sacrifice in particular cases. Ancient Chinese thinkers reflected on the *Tao* while their contemporaries in India pondered *Dharma* and philosophers in Greece pursued *Sophia*; wisdom teachers in Egypt reflected on *Maat* (truth, justice) and their counterparts in Israel reflected on *Hokmah* (wisdom).<sup>26</sup> To be sure,

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<sup>22</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: vintage Books, 1979); for a critical response to Said, see Robert Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and Its Discontents* (Woodstock & New York: Overlook Press, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Hans G. Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Joseph M. Kitagawa, ed., *The History of Religions: Retrospect and Prospect* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. and London: Collier MacMillan Publishers, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> F. Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion: Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution in February and May, 1870* (Elibron Classics, 2005), 13.

<sup>26</sup> Fung Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Derk Bodde (New York: Free Press, 1948, 1976); Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press,

these terms are not identical, and the perspectives of these ancient thinkers differed in important ways. Nonetheless, there is a conversation underway since antiquity that seeks to live in harmony with the underlying structure of the universe.

Each civilization has classic religious, philosophical perspectives that inform, guide, and challenge every generation. One of the most pressing challenges for universities in the present day is how to relate these heritages to each and to present challenges. If the age-old hostility among civilizations and religions is to be overcome, there needs to be respectful dialogue among differing civilizations and the religions that nourish them. Hans Küng has expressed the pointed challenge: “No survival without a world ethic. No world peace without peace between the religions. No peace between the religions without dialogue between the religions.”<sup>27</sup>

Many persons, including those often characterized as “fundamentalists,” interpret their religious texts in accordance with an exclusivist hermeneutics, maintaining that only their own tradition has the truth and all others are in error.<sup>28</sup> However, this is not the only option. Many thinkers today seek a more open, welcoming framework for conversation. The American theologian David Tracy has reflected on the challenge of interpreting religious classics in conversation with followers of other religious traditions. Drawing upon the work of Gadamer, Tracy explored the meaning of cultural and religious classics.<sup>29</sup> Gadamer saw classics as contemporary with each age that ponders them.<sup>30</sup> A great work of art undergoes what Gadamer called a *Verwandlung ins Gebilde*, a transformation into structure, which frees it from the particular circumstances of its origin and allows it to live its own life.<sup>31</sup> It has the temporality of a festival which is completely present in each occurrence: “It has its being only in becoming and return.”<sup>32</sup> Today these classical texts move beyond the boundaries of their period and their civilization of origin, encountering and challenging all the world’s civilizations. Universities can be sites where the ancient conversations continue in inter-civilizational contexts, leading to new challenges, questions, and possibilities.

Tracy develops the implications of Gadamer’s view of experience and hermeneutics for the conversation about religious classics in interreligious dialogue.<sup>33</sup> Tracy warns that genuine conversation is very difficult because it demands interlocutors to be freed from the domination of their personal and collective egos, from the desire always to win and be right.<sup>34</sup> Genuine conversation is a search for the true, whether the discussion occurs orally with a living partner or with a text from centuries past or with the inner dialogue partner inside each person. The search for truth demands that one be ready to revise earlier interpretations and change judgments and decisions. Genuine conversations, guided by eros for the truth, are unpredictable because one can never know where they will lead. Conversations leave their participants changed, transformed, understanding their experience in a new light. As Gadamer had proposed, Tracy believes that tradition and earlier personal experience does not lock persons into fixed positions but open people to be ready for the

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1985); R. Puligandla, *Fundamentals of Indian Philosophy* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975); Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, eds., *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973); Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002); Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993); Henri Frankfort, H.A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, Thorkild Jacobsen, and William A. Irwin, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1977).

<sup>27</sup> Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xv.

<sup>28</sup> Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby, Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>29</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York; Crossroad, 1981).

<sup>30</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 121-29.

<sup>31</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 110-21.

<sup>32</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 123.

<sup>33</sup> Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 110-15.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., rev.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 151-81.

unexpected. The classics of the world's religions are still living voices that challenge, provoke, irritate, and transform interlocutors today.

Tracy adapts Gadamer's phenomenology of conversation as the to-and-fro movement of a game. If we really play a game, we lose ourselves in the game and enter into its world. If we stand outside and only pretend to play, we are spoilsports. If our minds are made up before we enter the conversation, we are spoilsports and are not entering the game of conversation. Tracy assumes that the contemporary horizon is limited and still has much to learn from the classics of the past. While we question the past, the classics of the past question us as well. Contemporary understanding cannot see everything and cannot pass judgment on everything without passing through the discipline of rigorous conversation. Tracy proposes dialogue, especially interreligious dialogue as hope for a divided world.<sup>35</sup> Where the past has all too often been marked by conflict, dialogue offers possibility of a broader, more peaceful horizon. One of the greatest contributions that universities can make to the world is be homes of respectful, honest, and searching conversation.

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<sup>35</sup> David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Louvain: Peeters Press and Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990).