

Convergences and Divergences Among Cultural Traditions in the Greater Mediterranean

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Our discussion on classical culture is an important enrichment for the dialogue of cultures in and across the Greater Mediterranean. We can reflect on the implications of the focus on cultures beyond conventional definitions based on identities. Resetting the meaning of culture and starting over again from its classical definition linking heritage, instruction, and transmission is a good way to avoid the Scylla of a much too identitarian and essentialist view of culture and the Charybdis of erasing cultural originality from the civilizational achievements and the intercivilizational exchanges and so reducing culture to epiphenomena or, at best, to folklore. In other words, the recognition of diversity cannot be equated with cultural essentialism.

The study of Islam has represented a key field in academic and public contestations of essentialism from the end of colonialism to post-colonial reconfigurations of the relationship between the West and the Muslim majority world. The controversy on the epistemological and political foundations of Orientalism reached its apex and its widest publicity through the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 and his ensuing polemics with the leading scholar of Oriental studies Bernard Lewis. Yet the seeds and all basic arguments of Said's indictment were already evident in the critiques moved to Western Orientalism by leading Arab intellectuals in the early 1960s, like Anwar 'Abd al-Malek and Muhammad Arkoun. The denunciation of the historical and philological studies of the "Orient" in the West as enmeshed with political interests and cultural hegemony was, however, as legitimate as it was poor of consequences in revising the paradigms of the study of Islam. Far from configuring a clash between an old and a new paradigm, it marked a critical point in the relationship between the West and the "world of Islam." Part of the critique was focused on how much Islam, intended as religion but also as culture, as the heritage of a rich civilization, really determines the social and political shape of Muslim majority societies.

Is there a "third way" between power-saturated essentialism and culturally neutral formulas promoting a universalism uncontaminated by cultural diversity? A promising exploration of an alternative approach was being explored in parallel with the unfolding of the Orientalism controversy and with only scant cross-referencing to its works. It is a field of study¹ embracing a wide set of interpretive sciences, from philology, archaeology and history through philosophy to the social sciences proper, denominated by the *Achsenzeit*. This is the idea of a fundamental breakthrough in the human societies of Eurasia having occurred toward the middle of the first millennium BC. It was launched in the early 1950s by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers coherently with some key intuitions of Max and Alfred Weber and in parallel to the work of Eric Voegelin on the interpenetrations of the political and religious orders. But the truly interdisciplinary shaping of the field occurred in the 1970s, in particular thanks to a series of conference sponsored by the US journal *Daedalus* and that took place in Rome, Venice, and Jerusalem. This field was further developed by scholarly meetings and edited books revolving around the figure of Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, from the conferences in Bad Homburg in the early 1980s up to the recent meetings in Florence and Essen, the latter being focused in particular on Islam.

To sum up the key idea of a field of growing complexity, the two fundamental "axes" of the cultural breakthrough in the Western part of Eurasia centred on the Greater Mediterranean are the product of the emergence of prophetic monotheism and of philosophical investigation-*cum*-way of life, i.e. the Hebrew and the Greek civilizational models: both profoundly reshaping ideas of human identity, subjectivity and accountability. Various recombinations and transformations of these two models have subsequently led, in the "post-Axial" era, to the emergence of other religiously impregnated

¹ Let me here just signal the two most recent edited books based on the Florence and Essen conferences: Johann P. Arnason, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, and Björn Wittrock (eds.), *Axial Civilizations and World History*, Leiden: Brill, 2005, and Johann P. Arnason, Armando Salvatore, and Georg Stauth (eds.) *Comparative Civilizational Perspectives on Islam*, vol. 7 of *Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam*, Bielefeld: Transcript; New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2006.

civilizations, in particular Christianity and Islam. Within the Mediterranean area, during the Middle Ages there occurred a crystallization of three main civilizational poles, the Christian Latin, the Christian Byzantine and Sunni Islam.

One can delimit a thriving field of comparative civilizational analysis branching off from the *Achsenzeit* hypothesis and yielding a wider set of studies that, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, further extend, complexify and enrich the *Achsenzeit* approach and in particular its comparative dimension. Worth mentioning in this context is the work of the French historian of philosophy Rémi Brague and also his commentary on the earlier work of the political philosopher Leo Strauss. A critical combination of their work could invite us to map a set of characteristics of the Christian Latin (“Roman”) civilizational way vis-à-vis the Islamic Sunni (“Meccan”) one: not an exercise for the sake of oversimplifying civilizational complexity and intercivilizational exchange, but with the goal to reinvigorate the consciousness of cultural diversity within a common “post-Axial” universe of values, heir of the prophetic and philosophical ways.

Such a map can make us aware than in approaching dialogue several actors linked to various cultural orientations might develop different styles of communication and so approaches to dialogue. A consciousness of such diversity should help make sure that dialogue does not become a monologue in disguise based on some purportedly “Occidental” ideas opposed to “Oriental” ones. It is then apparent that the relation of the two civilizations to the double Axial legacy, Jewish and Greek, is marked by a stronger continuity in the case of Islam than for Latin Christianity, characterized by discontinuity but also eccentricity. This was authoritatively evidenced by the leading historian of late antiquity Peter Brown, who observed that the Muslim scholar is a quite direct heir to the classic ideals of *paideia*, unlike the Christian Latin monk, who happened to be the main cultural carrier in the Middle Ages. Correspondingly, the Islamic relation to the Axial sources is based on the idea of maximising their use value via their “digestion,” compared with Western Christianity where the preservation of the original texts and so their “inclusion” culminated in the “rediscovery” of classic culture with humanism and the Renaissance. In this sense, the lack of a Renaissance in Islam is due to its approach of perpetually adapting and reconstructing the heritage and not to an inherent deficit in cultural elaboration.

This perspective of comparative civilizational analysis that respectfully stresses differences in the way each civilization relates to its Axial heritage can become a substitute to the method, pursued by different leading European thinkers like Ernest Renan, Max Weber and many others (among contemporary social scientists, Bernard Badie with *Les deux cités*) who have viewed Islam as a collection of cultural and institutional deficits, compared with Western European developments. We should be rather aware that while the sources are the same, the concrete cultural articulations and also modalities of communications might, legitimately, differ.

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