

SUFI AND TAOIST HERITAGE AND GLOCALISM OR TWO TYPES OF CIVILIZATIONS AND TWO KINDS OF DIALOGUE ¹

By:
Yanis Eshots *

Abstrak

Makalah ini cuba untuk mempersembahkan bentuk persamaan di antara asas intuisi Sufisme dan Taoisme, iaitu yang berkaitan dengan persoalan 'kesatuan dalam keterbilangannya' dan kewujudan serta perubahan dalam diri manusia. Ini dilakukan berasaskan kajian Izutsu *Sufism and Taoism*. Tulisan ini menyarankan bahawa hanya pada tahap falsafah, persefahaman di antara pelbagai peradaban mampu membuahkan dialog metafizik yang berterusan. Dialog sebegini, jika dapat dipandu dari segi metodologinya, akan membangunkan falsafah *perennial* dalam maksudnya yang sebenar. Pada dasarnya adalah mungkin untuk dicapai suatu keadaan harmoni di antara pertentangan globalisasi

¹ The first version of this paper was presented at the conference on 'Dialogue, Culture et Mondialisation', held at the Université Marc Bloch, Strasbourg, France on 22-24 of November 2005.

* Yanis Eshots, Ph.D. is a lecturer of Islamic Philosophy and Sufism at the Department of Oriental Studies and the Faculty of Theology, University of Latvia.

dan faham setempat (*localism*) dan keadaan harmoni sedemikian hanya mampu dipastikan pada tahap dialog metafizik.

Katakunci: Sufisme, Taoisme, glocalisme, dialog metafizik, peradaban tradisi, peradaban moden, Izutsu

Abstract

On the basis of Izutsu's study "Sufism and Taoism", I attempt to demonstrate the similarity of the basic intuitions of Sufism and Taoism, namely, those of the unity-in-manyness, the self-evolvement of existence and the perpetual inner transformation of Man. I argue that only on the philosophical level mutual understanding between civilizations can result in lasting metaphysical dialogue. Such dialogue, if it is led methodically, can give rise to perennial philosophy in the true sense of the term. If it is possible to achieve in principle a harmony between the contradictory tendencies of globalization and localism, such harmony can only be established on the level of metaphysical dialogue.

Keywords: Sufism, Taoism, glocalism, metaphysical dialogue, traditional civilization, modern civilization, Izutsu

Introduction

All currently existing civilizations can conventionally be divided into traditional and non-traditional (modern). To the second group, strictly speaking, belongs only one civilization – that of the post-Christian West. In the first part of my article, I shall analyze the Sufi and Taoist heritage and, on the basis of this analysis, try to explain what I mean by "traditional civilization" and why establishing some sort of inter-civilizational philosophical dialogue between such civilizations is, in fact, not only desirable, but even inevitable. In the second part of my

article, in turn, the possibility of the dialogue between traditional and non-traditional civilizations on the basis of the so-called “glocalism” will be discussed.

Dialogue Between Traditional Civilizations: Sufi and Taoist Heritage

In his brilliant article “Negotiation of Modernity and Tradition within the Muslim World: The Case of the Sub-Continent,”² Professor Ejaz Akram states that “the core of every civilization is not culture but its primordial tradition.”³ He then explains that “by tradition here, we mean those principles that bind the origin of man to heaven via religion.”⁴ While I agree fully with Akram’s statement on the primordial tradition as the heart and core of every traditional civilization, his definition of that tradition seems to me too loose. Therefore, I would propose my own. Tradition, to me, is what rests on the undistorted innate metaphysical intuition of Reality, i.e. the intuition of the essential unconditional simplicity of Being (Existence), and comes into being as an afterthought of this intuition.⁵ In order to develop this intuition, i.e. “the ability to grasp the existence at its [abysmal] metaphysical depth” as Izutsu puts it,⁶ one must purify himself of all desires and stop all activity of Reason, thus annihilating his individual “ego” and, instead, actualizing in himself the Cosmic Ego which, in

² Akram, Ejaz (2003), “Negotiation of Modernity and Tradition within the Muslim World: The Case of the Sub-Continent” in S.G. Safavi (ed.), *Dialogue Among Civilizations: A Comparative Study on Islamic and Western Philosophy*, London: Salman -Azade Press p. 92-109. Cf. Izutsu, Toshihiko (1984), *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*, 2nd edition, Los Angeles: University of California Press; Nasr, Seyyed H. (1989), *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 2nd edition, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press; Guenon, Rene (1956), *La crise du monde moderne*, Paris: Gallimard and Segessary (1998), Victor, *From Illusion to Delusion: Globalization and the Contradictions of Late Modernity*, Bethesda, MD: International Scholars Publication.

³ Akram, “Negotiation”, p. 94.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 94, note 43.

⁵ See: Izutsu, *Sufism*, p. 81.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 474.

fact, is identical with the Absolute in the aspect of its creative activity.⁷ Hence, traditional civilization, both practically and theoretically, rests on self-limitation, on learning and practising intellectual, psychical and physical asceticism (self-renouncing).

The aim of this asceticism or self-renouncing is to extinguish desires and "turning the mind towards inside;"⁸ thus escaping the tyranny of Reason. To put it otherwise, as long as Intellect remains in the bondage of physical body, it manifests itself as Reason, i.e., as the faculty of logical thinking, by means of which we discriminate between things. The discriminating activity of Reason is naturally directed towards the outside, i.e., the things and phenomena that surround us in the external "objective" world, because the tendency of the impetus of human mind is by definition centrifugal. Therefore, Reason treats 'reality' as a more or less systematic collection of things and qualities. Each of the latter, in view of Reason, has its particular essence or quiddity by which it differs from all the rest.⁹

When, however, Intellect is released from the bondage of physical body and becomes disengaged (*mujarrad*), it acts not as Reason, but as a sort of mystical intuition: instead of reasoning about Existence, it becomes then in a position to directly experience it, to see beyond the sensible physical world the ultimate metaphysical Ground and Foundation of Existence. Through this experience, called by the Sufis *kashf* (unveiling), the Reality is perceived as coincidence of the opposites: a unity in multiplicity and a dynamic non-movement. For this reason, Chuang-tzu writes:

"... [the Way (*Tao*)] is, in this aspect, called Commotion-Tranquillity (*ying ning*). The name Commotion-Tranquillity refers to the fact that it (the Way - Y.E.) sets [all things] in turmoil and agitation and then heads them to Tranquillity"¹⁰.

⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 475.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 477.

⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 477.

¹⁰ *Chuang-tzu*, VI, quoted from: Izutsu, *Sufism*, p. 349.

Traditional civilization – like Islamic or Chinese – rests on this metaphysical intuition of Reality and, simultaneously, serves as means to provoke the development of this intuition in each of its members, to the degree possible, assisting the human being in his flight from the aforementioned “tyranny of Reason” and in finding his way to the “spring of the water of Life.” In such society, it is acknowledged as a commonplace truth that there are things incomparably higher than this-worldly profits and possessions such as material well-being, happiness in personal life and successful professional career. All in all considered, this-worldly life is regarded as a short but tremendously important episode in one’s spiritual journey. In this sense, traditional civilization can be described as mystical (supra-rational) and other-worldly oriented, whereas a non-traditional civilization represented by the post-Christian West must be qualified as rational, i.e. based exactly on the dictatorship of Reason, and this-worldly directed and, hence, death-denying.

Since traditional civilizations are based on similar value systems and, more importantly, on one and the same innate primordial metaphysical intuition which can be provisionally referred to as “the unity” (oneness) of Existence (Arabic = *wahdat al-wujūd*; Chinese = *t’ien ni* (Heavenly Levelling) or *t’ien chün* (Heavenly Equalization), establishing metaphysical dialogue and finding mutual understanding between them is natural. Or, rather, to state it more decisively, such dialogue and understanding are due to occur, given the oneness of the underlying metaphysical intuition and the similarity of the basic philosophical tenets. Furthermore, I would even venture to assert that such dialogue and understanding between traditional civilizations have always existed which is proved by the very fact that their influence upon each other has never been destructive, as this is the case with the influence of the modern non-traditional civilization upon the traditional ones.

The mystical ideal of traditional civilization and the very purpose of its existence is the spiritual transformation of human being through an immediate intuitive grasp of Existence at its metaphysical depth. If we consider Sufi and

Taoist practices, we see that this spiritual transformation occurs in both cases according to the same basic pattern. The Sufis call the method employed to achieve this transformation *fanā'*, while the Taoists refer to it as *tso wang* (sitting in oblivion, literally 'sitting-galloping').¹¹ As Izutsu states, this spiritual transformation consists:

"in a complete nullification of the 'ego' as the empirical subject of all activities of Reason and desires... [which] results in the actualization of a new... Cosmic Ego, which, in the case of Taoism, is considered to be completely at one with the Absolute in its creative activity and, in the case of Ibn 'Arabi, is said to be unified with the Absolute to the utmost limit of possibility."¹²

In other words, all traditional civilizations presuppose some sort of spiritual re-birth or 'second birth', often referred to as 'transformation from this-worldly modality to other-worldly one', but taking place before natural death which occurs through man's coming in touch with the Absolute Reality, whereas non-traditional civilization does not presuppose it.

A necessary precondition of this spiritual transformation is what the Taoists call 'purification of the Mind' or 'spiritual fasting'. It consists in changing the natural centrifugal tendency of the activity of mind to a centripetal one, thus turning one's undivided attention to the innermost core of human existence. As the Taoist sages explain, we cannot penetrate inside the Absolute and intuit it through external things, which we can perceive only from the outside. This can be done only from within ourselves: solely through going inside of one's self one can participate in the Mystery of Existence.¹³

The pair of opposites which Chuang-tzu employs in this regard is *tso chi'h* (sitting-galloping) and *tso wang* (sitting-forgetting). The first term refers to the constant movement of our mind and its perpetual wandering from one object to

¹¹ See *ibid.*, p. 475.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 475.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 477.

another. This is the ordinary state of our mind before we have experienced spiritual transformation. To describe this situation of a man, Chuang-tzu uses the expression *shih hsin* (making the Mind one's own teacher). By so doing, i.e. making the Mind his teacher, man creates a false ontological centre of his personality – i.e., his 'ego' – and absolutizes it. Mind-Teacher teaches man to discriminate between things and to form opinions about them, considering them as 'good' and 'bad' and 'right' and 'wrong'.

In order to change the centrifugal tendency of mind to centripetal, all "openings" and "doors" of the body must be closed, so that there is no possibility for the Mind to wander around. Finding no way out, it then turns inside and goes to man's existential core. Closing the openings and directing one's mind towards the heart constitutes the heart and substance of all ascetic practices. This experience of gradual penetrating to one's existential core is usually referred to as "conceiving" and "birth" of a spiritual baby and its subsequent "growth" to adult age, as we shall see shortly, non-traditional civilization knows nothing about spiritual re-birth, wherefore, in it, human being always remains at the state of adolescent, who is not initiated into the mysteries that unveil the depth of Reality.

Thus, we have established that traditional civilization is based on the metaphysical intuition of the Absolute Reality and the experience of the latter through unveiling or 'initiation'. In order to achieve this purpose, a complex of techniques and ascetic practices is developed, and a network of initiation societies established. Traditional civilization is centripetal by its structure, which centripetality mirrors the centripetal activity of the transformed human mind, that of the mystic.

To conclude the first part of the paper, I would like to point here to Toshihiko Izutsu and his famous book "Sufism and Taoism" as a beautiful illustration of my thesis that, between traditional civilizations based on common metaphysical experience, establishing a dialogue and achieving mutual understanding is not merely a possibility and an object of desire, but an unavoidable affair and an inevitable occurrence.

As far as I know, Izutsu's primary mystical background was that of Zen Buddhism. Nevertheless, in his comparative study he demonstrates with great skill and insight the unity of the mystical foundation of Sufi and Taoist philosophical teachings and, hence, the metaphysical kinship of Chinese and Islamic civilizations. What is more, his elucidation of the structure of the Taoist (Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu) thought has proved to be most helpful in facilitating the understanding of a number of fine points of the Sufi (Ibn 'Arabi) doctrine. This shows that not only is theirs easier understood through ours – the depth of ours is often penetrated not otherwise than through theirs. That is to say, the accidental outward differences between traditional civilizations can and must be used as a background against which their inner substantial unity can be better apprehended.

Glocalism as an Attempt of Dialogue Between Traditional and Non-Traditional Civilizations

Unlike traditional civilizations, non-traditional civilization – by which I mean the post-Christian Western civilization – do not rest on the metaphysical intuition of the Absolute Reality, which is hidden beyond and, simultaneously, manifests itself through empirical phenomena. It is, for this reason, an entity, lacking the metaphysical and mystical dimension. As a whole, it attempts to avoid coming in touch with the Absolute Reality. Therefore, it is, by definition, centrifugal and bases itself on the principle of permanent expansion. The centrifugal impetus of non-traditional civilization mirrors the centrifugal activity of the human mind before its transformation through spiritual rebirth which, as we saw in the first part of the article, can only be brought about by 'spiritual fasting' and 'sitting in oblivion'. In brief, non-traditional civilization is a product of untransformed and, therefore, metaphysically undeveloped mind, which, due to its attachment to the material body and the sensory world, can only act as Reason (the faculty of logical thinking). It is, consequently, the civilization which is completely under the sway of Reason and can be justly described as the tyranny of Reason. As I just said, Reason

is the human mind in its non-transformed and metaphysically undeveloped state, a chrysalis of the Mind, which has to be radically transformed in order to become a butterfly (Mind proper). Or, say, it is an adolescent who has yet to undergo initiation.

The civilization which acts by the impetus given to it by Reason's centrifugal activity, therefore, must be described as spiritually and metaphysically immature. Now, for a number of reasons, this spiritually unripe and "adolescent" civilization has been endowed with tremendous economical and military power, which permits it to bully "adult" and mature traditional civilizations, and to claim that its immature and childish values must be accepted by the entire inhabitants of the global village. In such circumstances, the bullied inhabitants of the village have no choice but to seek a compromise and to agree to – at least, partly, – accept or pretend to accept the imposed rules of behaviour, in a hope, that this will appease the bully and, in exchange, he will agree to tolerate, for the time being, some of their traditional ways and customs.

It was, to me, a complex of such or suchlike circumstances that necessitated the recent emergence of the so-called "glocalism" movement. What this alleged attempt to establish a harmony between "global" and "local"¹⁴ most reminds me of, are the ancient tales of an extremely powerful dragon, in order to appease whose appetites for a while, chaste ladies, i.e., the best what the inhabitants of that area had, the very embodiment of the vital force of the traditional civilization, were regularly sent in their dozens to its dinner table. One wonders what will happen when the dragon will have eaten all the maidens. If no valiant knight comes to the rescue of that country, in all likelihood, the dragon will plunder and completely destroy the entire countryside. Once everything far and near is destroyed and the beast is unable to find a sound external object towards

¹⁴ In fact, between the ever-expanding non-traditional civilization, which demands a complete and unconditional acceptance of its values more and more aggressively, and the ever-decreasing and weakening traditional civilizations.

which to turn its destructive power, it will inevitably destroy itself.

To put it otherwise, when centrifugal and centripetal forces exert influence upon each other, a sort of clash is inevitable. Therefore, a clash between traditional and non-traditional civilizations is also inevitable.¹⁵ Depending on which tendency – centripetal, represented by traditional civilizations, or centrifugal, embodied by the non-traditional one, proves to be stronger, the humankind as a whole will either return to the traditional centripetal value system or switch fully to the centrifugal one, coming to worship the idols of Reason and Permanent Expansion. In the second case, the existence of the ecosystem of the Earth is doomed to destruction. Needless to say, the particular forms of life - which due to our spiritual short-sightedness we tend to regard as the only possessors of life - existing in this ecosystem (including *homo sapiens*) are also destined to perish.

For the above stated reasons, I consider the theory of “glocalism” to be based on metaphysical fallacy and wishful thinking; as long as we keep sending the dragon our maidens, it will let us alone and, for the time being, there is no direct threat to the existence of our community as a whole. We pay that price and, by paying it, we ensure the stability of our country and society.

A more insightful attitude lies in understanding that the penetration of the influence of non-traditional civilization into the value system of the traditional ones can, to a degree, be resisted and slowed down by building fences around the physical and spiritual space of the traditional civilization. This attitude was taken by Stalin, who initiated the project of the “Iron Curtain” – a multilevel barrier system¹⁶ around the perimeter of the USSR. Simultaneously,

¹⁵ What I mean by “clash” here, is, primarily, a spiritual and metaphysical affair, which may or may not have external manifestations in the form of ideological, political and military conflicts.

¹⁶ In particular, military where the “nuclear umbrella” was spread over the Soviet Union and its allies and cultural in which very limited access to the products of the modern Western culture, ban of Western pop music.

the late Stalinism appealed to the Russian national pride and attempted to restore the traditional values of the Russian culture. However, Stalin died before the project was completed, and, among his successors, there were no personalities of similar spiritual size and grandness, wherefore, while outwardly the implementation of his ideas continued, in fact, they were misunderstood and degraded.

In order to make such resistance effective, it is essential to maintain in the people's consciousness the idea of spiritual Centre, which constitutes the heart and the core of that particular civilization and through which the Absolute Reality reveals itself in that culture and civilization, according to the specific preparedness shared by its representatives. The spiritual Centre of this or that civilization is usually personified by certain gods and heroes and symbolized by certain customs, religious institutions and practices, and metonymically – by geographical objects and historical monuments. Due to their symbolical significance, the latter too must be closely guarded from exposition to harmful influence and idle curiosity by building around them a system of hard and soft barriers.

However, these are but auxiliary measures that may be taken by traditional civilizations in order to resist the destructive centrifugal tendency. The essential thing is not to lose the way to the spiritual and metaphysical Centre for themselves. In other words, to keep alive the primordial metaphysical intuition of the Absolute Reality and to preserve a set of practices needed to develop it, i.e., the art of spiritual transformation through closing the "doors" and "openings" of sense perception, "sitting in oblivion" and "spiritual fasting." The most necessary thing is not to fight the infinite external manifestations of the harmful influence of non-traditional civilization. Rather, it is to transform ourselves by changing the direction of the activity of our mind from outside to inside, thus turning it towards our existential core. Once this is done and the centripetal tendency prevails, we can govern the world by Non-Doing, i.e., by following the Way; no external action is needed. Dangerous as the assault of the non-traditional civilization

and its fake values may seem, upon reflection, we realize that it is simply an extension and externalization of the centrifugal activity of our own mind.

Thus, to me, the entire issue of dialogue and clash between civilizations rests on a deeper issue of the structure of human consciousness, the patterns of its activity and the mystery of the spiritual transformation and rebirth of human being. In order to know the other, we must first know ourselves truly and deeply. To understand other civilizations and to evaluate their possible positive and negative influence upon that of ours, and to fight such influences if needs be, we must first examine thoroughly the tendencies of our consciousness and learn how to control and transform them.