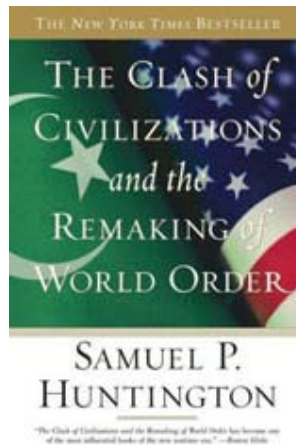


MY UNDERSTANDING OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

Author - ANIL CHAWLA

A. Introduction

The concept of a "clash of civilizations" was first drafted in 1990 by Bernard Lewis, a committed Zionist, to describe the conflict between political Islam and the West. A few years later, in 1993, Samuel Huntington, elevated the thesis of a clash of civilizations into a universal historical principle. Lewis, Huntington, and many other thinkers who have discussed the theory, have seen the Western civilization as a monolith with no internal fault lines or contradictions. It is common for many western thinkers to treat western civilization as the ultimate development of human species and treat every other culture as a lower level of civilization and culture. Before any discussion on clash of civilizations, it is important to understand the essential features of western civilization.



Many American and European universities have (at least they used to have till a few years ago) courses on Western civilization. Most of these courses state that Western civilization has been formed from three distinct traditions:

- (1) The classical culture of Greece and Rome;
- (2) The Christian religion; and
- (3) The Enlightenment of the modern era.

Many have seen Western civilization as a synthesis of all three traditions; others have emphasized the conflicts among them, the struggle between the Christian religion and the Enlightenment being especially consequential. These views of western civilization do not reflect an external observer's objective view. It is the perspective of western thinkers biased by their ideas of how they would like themselves to be seen.

B. Romans and Tribes

Western thinkers, in their analysis of western civilization, make a jump from Greek and Roman civilization straight to modern renaissance. The fact that Roman Empire did not cover most of present-day Western Europe is glossed over. Influence of tribes like Vikings, Normans, Goths, Franks, Saxons, Thuringians, Alamanni, Macromanni, Teutons, Norse, Celts, Cherusci, etc. is also ignored when discussing the mindset of present Western civilization. Most of these tribes were described as "barbarians" by Greek and Roman historians. Needless to say, that this description arose from a deep-seated bias against the tribes, and not from any in-depth understanding of these tribes. Yet, it can well be concluded that these tribes were fierce, war-like and had strong family links. They were, generally speaking, loyal to their mates for life. They were not known for leading a life of luxury. In fact they led a hard life and were content to live and let live.

It was the Roman insatiable desire for luxury and riches that brought the Roman Empire in conflict with the tribes. Though the Western thinkers like to recall the philosophy and theology of Rome and Greece, the fact is that philosophy and theology were not central to the life of Greece and Rome. Gluttonous banquets and orgies thrown by Grecian and Roman elite (not to mention the depths of depravity and sexual license incurred among such festivities) dominated the Greek and Roman mind. Greek and Roman philosophers were just a shade better than gladiators and court jesters - dazzling everyone with their brilliant wit and arguments, without in any way disturbing the appercart of unbridled luxury.



Roman luxury needed direct and indirect slaves. Direct slaves were the ones who toiled in the Roman towns doing all menial jobs while their masters enjoyed the pleasures of food and flesh. But more important than these urban slaves were the indirect ones who worked in the vast country-land that fed the Roman cities. Much before the words colonialism and imperialism were even coined, the city republics of Greek and Rome had converted the villages around the cities into colonies from where there was an incessant transfer of resources that helped the city folks lead a life of luxury, even while the countrymen just about managed to eke out a living. As the demand for luxuries grew in the cities, the kings were

forced to expand the catchment area from where resources flowed into the cities. This expansion brought the Romans in conflict with the "barbaric" tribes.

Initially, the tribes were content with just resisting the Roman onslaught, but soon they realized that people used to a life of luxury could not be good warriors. Romans had become too soft to fight. Tribes exploited this. To fight the tribes, the Romans started employing "barbarians" as soldiers in their army. In due course, all positions of power in the Roman Government were in the hands of the so-called barbarians. This led to the end of the Roman civilization, but only an apparent end. The economic model of Greek and Roman civilization was adopted by the "barbarian" tribes who were no longer content to just live and let live. Now they had the benefit of Roman "education", which told them that the only aim of life worth pursuing is to strive for continuous increase of wealth and luxury by all means, fair or foul.

Contentment is a dirty word in Western civilization. In recent times, a liberal thinker (John Stuart Mill) said, "I would rather be a pig than be a contented man" (quoted from memory). From the Romans to the tribesmen to the modern day, the first commandment of western civilization has been an unrestrained pursuit of wealth and luxury. Each individual doggedly pursues pleasures and luxuries stepping on toes and necks, if necessary, of everyone else. This reflects in the collective psyche of the societies. Imperialism, slave trade and even the Western world's espousal of the drug trade in China and other places, as long as it suited them, were expressions of this collective psyche.

The mindset that looks at every other human being as either an obstacle or a stepping-stone in one's mad pursuit for wealth, luxury and pleasures is not confined to matters of collective psyche only. As a fundamental building block of psychology, it affects every aspect of a person's behaviour, including mundane day-to-day matters. The following two examples may help to clarify the point:

- ❑ Travelling in a long-distance train in India or China, one notices that it is customary for passengers to offer food to co-passengers, even though they may be perfect strangers. This is unimaginable in Europe and America. In USA, it is said, "there is nothing like a free lunch". Quite in contrast, free lunch (called 'langar') is an essential feature of all Sikh places of worship. When Swami Prabhupad (founder of International Society for Krishna Consciousness) reached USA, he had hardly any money. Yet, Swami Prabhupad would offer to share his limited meals with anyone who happened to come along. ISKCON temples across the world continue this tradition till today. A culture built on snatching the other man's bread cannot understand this sharing of one's food.



Free food being served at a Sikh Gurudwara

- ❑ Sharing of food is central to the Oriental psyche. In a restaurant in India, if four persons are eating together, they will share every dish that is brought to the table. Quite often a guest will just tell the host to order whatever pleases the host. It will be considered extremely discourteous for four people eating together on a table to order four entirely different dishes and then each one eats his own. But this is exactly what happens in Europe and America. Sharing of food, or for that matter anything else, is not a virtue that Western civilization practices.

One does not know whether the so-called barbarian tribes used to share food. But we do know that the tribes did not have sexual orgies of the type Rome was famous for. We also know that Roman orgies had bestiality, child molestation, sado-masochism and many such acts, which were unheard of in the barbarian cultures that valued family life. Europe today, probably, has more family life than Rome had in its most glorious days. One cannot say the same with confidence about United States of America. Though, of course, family life remains alive in both Europe and USA. On the other hand, when one looks at the fact that USA and parts of Europe have almost five times more incidents of rape and sexual crimes per hundred thousand of population than India, one is forced to seek the underlying psychological factors. The explanation, which comes to one's mind, is that a culture that seeks maximization of wealth, luxury and pleasures at all costs tends to look at women and even children as objects to be used for one's pleasure. If collectively speaking one does not bother about killing thousands in Iraq or Vietnam or Bengal to further one's self-interests, it stands to logic that, in an individual's mind, one does not respect the modesty of a woman or care for a child.



Surely, most people in Europe and America take good care of their children - it is a human instinct. Western civilization cannot undo the natural programming of caring for children built into human instinct. Yet, the western civilization's influence runs counter to the natural instinct of caring. Put differently, the western culture teaches one to emphasize the instinct of maximization of pleasures, while de-emphasizing the instinct of care. With the instinct of pleasure-seeking getting upper hand over the instinct of caring, a Western man grudgingly takes care of his children (till they reach adulthood) but ignores all other relationships.

A couple of years ago (2003), about 15000 people died in Paris when summer temperatures rose too high. Most of Paris was on vacation and there were not sufficient persons to take care of the elderly and infirm. When some young people on vacation were informed that their father / mother / grandparent had died, they refused to cancel their vacation. President of France issued an appeal to the people to take care of their elders but refused to cancel his vacation. Obviously, in the western world, care for one's parents or grand parents cannot take precedence over one's immediate pleasures.

Indian businessmen routinely extend hearty hospitality and courtesies to their business associates from Europe and America on visit to India even if there is no likelihood of any business being transacted in immediate future. With experience, Indian business class is now learning that the European or American, who enjoyed their hospitality for days or even weeks, may even refuse a ten-minute appointment at his / her office if there is no possibility of transacting business immediately. European / American attitude is - why waste time. Indian attitude is - we can be friends, even though we may not do any business. It takes an Indian some time to realize the western man's sharp focus on self-interests.

C. Christianity

The irony is that a civilization that emphasizes pleasures and self-interest to such a high degree professes Christianity - a religion founded on pain and suffering of Jesus Christ. A possible explanation for this irony is that Christianity, as it has evolved, has more to do with Church and less to do with Jesus. To understand the role of Christianity in Western mind, let us look at the evolution of Christianity as an organized religion.



Christianity originated in Jerusalem, which is located in present-day Israel. So in a way, Christianity is an Asian religion and came to Europe almost two centuries after its birth. Jesus was a Jew who revolted against the ruling elite of his day and preached a system of religious practices that offended the people in power. He was crucified by the ruling elite but he did not retaliate or even ask his followers to rise up in arms. If he had compromised with his tormentors, he could have lived a life of luxury ever after. Story of Jesus Christ was not written down for a long time after his going to heaven, since his followers believed that he would come back. It was only about a century later that New Testament was written. For the first two or three centuries, followers of Jesus Christ used to meet and sing hymns; the Church was in its nascent form and had no powers.



Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 312 AD was the turning point in the history of Church. Before spread of Christianity, each country of Europe had its own religious traditions. Roman Empire was pagan (Mithraism) though there were a few Jews and Christians living in Rome. Emperor Constantine's conversion came at a point when Roman civilization was on the decline. The period after decline of Roman civilization saw the emergence of various tribes as the new invaders. They had tasted their first blood on the peripheries of Roman Empire. They had also seen what a life of luxury could be. Now, they wanted the same luxuries that the Roman elite had enjoyed. This pursuit of riches by various tribes took the form of bloody wars in Europe that lasted for more than a thousand years (some would say that World War II was the last of such wars).

The victorious Kings used to encounter resistance from indigenous religions. It was at this point that Christianity came in handy. Church was too willing to provide the spiritual backup, needed by a victorious king, in return for money, land and new followers. The king benefited because the demolition of indigenous religions ensured that he could rule in peace without a fear of local revolt. Indigenous religions brought with them power structures deeply rooted in the psyche of the people. Destroying these structures was essential for ruling a country. It may be mentioned that peaceful conversions to Christianity were rare. Saxons were converted at sword point in 804 AD. Danish and Norwegian Vikings were not Christianized till 11th century. Scandinavia and Balkans were the last to fall to Christianity - Poland in 966, Hungary 1001, and Lithuania in 1387.

From 312 to around fourteenth century, we see in Europe a period when each group of ruling elites wanted to capture as much power and wealth as possible by use of sword or by cunningness. Kings and royals had no concern for their own people. The indigenous unorganized pagan religions, which were close to the people's day-to-day lives, were systematically destroyed to ensure that people had no recourse to an alternative belief system, which could possibly threaten the excesses of the ruling elite. The Church emerged as the perfect handmaid for European despotic kings during this period. Church was providing, what Karl Marx later called as "opium for the masses". Church conducted charity programmes, ran schools and hospitals, and in general provided the healing touch to populations brutalized by the oppressive monarchs. In the process, the Church controlled the minds of the people making them weak and pliant, making sure that they had no will to rise up in revolt against oppression and exploitation - just right for being ruled by despots.

The evolution of Church into a supporting institution for Kings is interesting. An Evangelical Christian friend recently wrote to me that Christianity is more than what is written in Bible. How true! Jesus did not write any portion of the Bible. In fact, if I have understood Jesus correctly, he never accepted the Old Testament in entirety as Church did a few centuries later. This was probably done as part of a compromise with some rulers and to acquire a higher level of acceptability among the educated classes that had a large number of Jews.

Jesus had said, Love Thy Neighbour. He never said – Love thy neighbour, if he is Christian and kill him if he is pagan. Jesus was a prophet of universal love, peace and kindness. Church does not (even today) believe in any love or kindness for pagans. A few months ago, Catholic Church issued an apology to Jews and women – not to pagans. From fourth century to fifteenth century or so, on one hand the Church helped soften up the Christian masses to be ruled by despotic Kings and on the other hand, the Church provided a moral basis for the most cruel and barbaric tormenting and killing of millions of people.

The cruelty of the Church was extended to not just the pagans but also its own people. Recently there has been some interest in the killing of Knights Templar, who were soldier monks devoted to the Christian cause. From 1307 to 1314 all the Templars were arrested, brutally tortured and killed under an arrangement between the Kings and the Pope. Almost all historians accept that the charges against the Templars were baseless and ridiculous. It appears that the Templars had just become inconvenient for the Kings as well as the Pope. Hence, the wrath of God fell on these soldier monks of Christianity.



Templars were probably a small group compared to the large number of so-called witches executed during 1400-1800 (mostly during 1600-1800). The following account from http://witches.monstrous.com/witch_hunt.htm paints a picture of the worst face of Christian Church.

The execution of about half a million witches in Europe in the period of 1400 - 1792, the majority of whom were female, some male or even children, and the majority of whom were burned at the stake or hanged after being extensively tortured, an event unparalleled in human history. Most of these victims probably would have viewed themselves as good Christians, and were not member of any secret cult: most of the confessions about secret meetings or convents can be shown to be the result of the torture on one hand, and the superstitions of the inquisitors on the other. The Burning Times was one of the foulest periods in the history of Western Civilization, a time when reason and compassion gave way to prejudice and frenzy, when mere accusation or simply being "different" could result in the most sadistic and brutal tortures and eventually death.

The idea of burning witches, one of the cruelest forms of execution, is said to have originated with Saint Augustine (354-430), who said "*that pagans, Jews, and heretics would burn forever in eternal fire with the Devil unless saved by the Catholic Church.*"

Witches, also were classed as heretics, during the time of the Inquisition. Heretics were not only disbelievers of the church doctrine, but, many also were accused of being servants of the Devil by forming compacts with him to get his help. The accused were sentenced to execution by burning when found guilty of heresy, and few escaped this conviction of the church, which practically controlled every aspect of human life, because "Fire itself is the element of purification, and nothing less than fire could negate the evil that was said to be witches."

The 16th century demonologist, Jean Bodin, stated in "*De la Demonomanie des Sorciers*":

Even if the witch has never killed or done evil to man, beast, or fruits, and even if he has always cured bewitched people, or driven away tempests, it is that he has renounced God and treated with Satan that he deserves to be burned alive...Even if there is no more than the obligation to the Devil, having denied God, this deserves the most cruel death that can be imagined.

The idea of burning could also come from the "Wicker man" of the pagan Celts. As reported in accounts by Julius Caesar and other Romans, the Celts would build a huge, cage-like structure in the shape of a large man made from wood or wicker. Inside it were stuffed living human beings. In bonfire-like fashion the "wicker man" was set ablaze, sacrificing the people inside.



Jesus lived a simple and ascetic life. He never acquired any riches or property. Church preached the virtues of poverty to the gullible masses, even as it kept increasing its lands, wealth and riches. By the end of first millennium, Pope and Cardinals were living in palaces that might have put even some Kings to shame.

This was the point when the cozy relationship between Church and Kings spoiled. The Church was no longer content to just play a second fiddle. It wanted more of the power. This led to a long drawn power struggle, about which much has been written.

When Europeans started moving out of Europe in search of colonies, it was in a sense repetition of history. Instead of Romans attacking "barbarian" tribes across Europe, it was Europeans (which mostly included tribesmen duly cultured in the ways of Rome) attacking the tribes across the world. The two key differences, between Roman times to the onset of colonialism, were technology and the Church. It is said that when Europeans landed in Africa, in one hand they had a gun and in the other hand was a Bible.

In Africa and Asia, Church helped the colonialists in the same way that it had helped medieval European kings. The colonialists, in association with the Church, destroyed indigenous pagan religions and made local people weak and pliant. Wherever indigenous religions were too firmly established, the colonialists found life difficult. It is not a coincidence that independence movement in such countries had strong pagan religious overtones. For example, in India, leaders like Swami Vivekanand, Swami Dayanand, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi used Hindu religious symbols and practices to mobilize people against British colonialism.

Church helped colonialists exploit Asia and Africa just as they had helped despotic kings to oppress and exploit the people of Europe. Christianity in association with the rulers destroyed indigenous religions of Europe – a job that is still unfinished in Asia and Africa, according to Church sources. Unfortunately for the Church, even in Europe the pagan religions are still alive and the process of Christianization is far from complete. In fact, paganism has been rising from its ashes across almost every part of Europe.

For centuries, Church had been in the forefront of campaign for most cruel torture and killing of traditional pagan healers like druids and witches across Europe. Druids and witches had been painted in the darkest colours by the propaganda machinery of Church. It is nothing short of miracle that now there is a growing understanding and respect for the useful role played by these traditional medical practitioners for centuries. Societies and associations of neo-converts to the faith of druids and witches are coming up across Europe and America.

In the past five decades, power of Church has reduced considerably in every country of Western Europe. Population surveys in every country reveal that the local population (excluding immigrants) has a significant percentage of Christians, non-Christians (including agnostics) as well as of pagans. Even among so-called Christians, a large percentage is of Church-less Christians – people who believe in Jesus Christ and go to church on special occasions but are not willing to let their life be controlled by the Church.

Five hundred years ago it would have been unimaginable and would have surely invited death by burning on stakes, but today pagan festivals are celebrated openly at various places across Europe (and America).



In addition to festivals that are declared to be pagan, there are number of festivals that are not Christian and are celebrated across the western world – Valentine Day, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Thanksgiving, and every local festival including national days of various countries. Church has never liked such non-Christian festivities by believers. It is only a sign of the times that the Church is unable to do anything about sheep going out of the control of the shepherd so blatantly.



The more worrying part for the clergy is the growing pagan influence that one sees in Christian festivals. Surprisingly, even celebration of Christmas is not free of pagan influence. It might surprise some to know that the most visible symbols of Christmas – Santa Claus and Christmas Tree – both are of pagan origin and have no connection whatsoever with Christianity or Church or Bible. Santa Claus, also known as Father Christmas, is typically like a pagan or Hindu god. One can see this when one looks at Santa riding on a reindeer-driven-chariot. The association of every divine personality with some animal species is Hindu or pagan and no Christian saint rides an animal driven chariot. Surely, there have been muted protests by Churches about the rising importance of Santa in Christmas celebrations across Europe and America.



Catholic Church (as well as all other Churches) has also been warning its believers about adopting “non-Christian forms of meditation” (read Yoga) without much success.

There is a growing concern in Church circles about the modern western approach to religion, best described by the term – cafeteria attitude. Modern western mind looks at religion (often more than one religion) and picks what it likes and leaves what it does not like. A man might get baptized but still go to a Muslim friend’s house on Eid; seek peace, solace and good health in Hindu Yoga classes; attend lectures on Buddhism by followers of Dalai Lama; take his girl friend for abortion; break bread with witches in a rock festival; and later come to the Church to get his marriage solemnized. This sort of behaviour does not bother an Oriental mind. For example, in Japan marriages are held the Shinto way while rituals of death are generally Buddhist. It is rumoured that Jesus had travelled to India and the Orient. But one sees none of the Oriental liberalism in the religion that his so-called followers have built.



Christianity, as it has evolved, is a religion of power, of controlling minds and lives. Power of clergy is derived from the fact that they convert millions into sheep ready for sale to abattoirs under the promise of leading to heaven. As human beings learn to be human beings, they refuse to be sheep – that is the greatest challenge before Christianity and various Churches. In fact this is a clash that has been going on for past three centuries or so.



Voltaire, Nietzsche, Marx and many other western thinkers led a frontal attack against religion, but they were attacking only the institutionalized form of Christian religion represented by the Church.

Present civilization of Europe and USA includes a mix of various currents. On one hand, Christianity is still alive and orthodox elements have been trying to reclaim their lost glory.

Loud anti-abortion voices in USA are evidence that Christian Churches are still a force to reckon with. On the other hand, there is a growing interest in pagan practices and festivals. It is impossible to look into the future and predict whether paganism will dominate or one of the Churches will rule again. Instead of trying to predict and forecast, let us try to understand paganism.

D. Paganism

Traditionally, pagan was a derogatory term used to describe anyone who was not a Jew or Muslim or Christian. In a way, it is the Christian equivalent of “kafir” (used by Muslims to describe non-believers). Muslims do not use the term ‘kafir’ for Christians and Jews (who are called Ehle-Kitaab, followers of a book, in contrast with those who do not follow any one book). Similarly, the Christians abstain from calling Jews or Muslims as pagans. However, all other religions are called pagans.

Contemporary Paganism is the restoration of indigenous religion(s), especially those of ancient Europe. Paganism has grown in popularity greatly during the last hundred years. The growth coincides with a decline of Christianity in Europe, and the increase in knowledge of past and distant cultures.



Druid ceremony at Stonehenge

In modern world, the term Contemporary Paganism is used to describe a group of contemporary religions based on a reverence for nature. It encompasses a diverse community with some groups concentrating on specific traditions, practices or elements such as ecology, witchcraft, Celtic traditions or certain gods. Wiccans, Druids, Shamans, Sacred Ecologists, Odinists and Heathens all make up parts of the Pagan community.

Whilst there are significant differences between these strands of contemporary Paganism, most Pagans share an ecological vision and involvement that comes from the Pagan belief in the organic vitality and spirituality of the natural world.

Moving beyond contemporary paganism and looking at pagan religions as a broad category, as against book-based religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam, we see a vast array of pagan religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Contemporary Paganism and many indigenous religions of various countries.

In all pagan religions, whether modern or contemporary or ancient, the relationship of the individual with the cosmos or nature, which is considered divine, is direct and without any intermediary. In all one-book-based religions, human beings are prevented or even prohibited

from being in direct communication with the divine; all communication between the divine and the layperson is through an established hierarchy. For example, in Christianity, God revealed himself through his son and the message was passed on by the apostles in the form of Gospels, which are handed down through the elaborate system of Church. All truth in Judaism, Christianity or Islam is revealed by the Almighty to a select person (prophet) who conveys it through a proper channel to all those who are not so privileged. It is blasphemy for anyone to attempt to bypass the 'proper channel' and see or experience or talk to the divine Almighty.

In contrast, Paganism, in every part of the world, encourages a person to reach out to the cosmic whole or reality or Almighty. The role of the priest or guru is that of a guide. The priest or guru, claims no exclusive license or authority on behalf of the cosmic divinity. A pagan priest is supposed to hold the hand of a truth seeker, while he or she walks through the path. At some point in the journey of truth, the seeker is encouraged to let go of the hand and walk all alone and experience for himself or herself.



It is important to say – himself or herself – because in all pagan religions (exceptions aside), women and men do not have different standing in the eyes of the cosmic divinity. A woman can experience the ultimate truth as much as a man can. In one-book-based religions, this is not the case. The 'proper channel' from cosmic divinity to layperson consists of a predominantly male institutionalized hierarchy (from the prophet downwards). This male-hierarchy pushes women to a lower status. No doubt, in pagan religions, there have been instances of atrocities on women, but these are isolated distortions without any underlying basis in the fundamental philosophy of any pagan religion.



Second important differentiation between pagan and non-pagan religions is the concept of God or Ultimate Divine Being. For all prophet-based religions, God is an entity separate from the world; God is the creator while the world is created. The duality of the creator and creation is an essential feature of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. In paganism, the creator and the creation are one; the cosmos as a whole is the Ultimate Divine Being. Paganism denies the existence of a creator being separate from the cosmos. In a way, under the pagan view every human being is a part of the Ultimate Divine Being and may even be called as Son (or daughter) of God. For a Christian or Muslim, claiming to be Son of God will be considered to be the ultimate blasphemy.

Ultimate Divine Being is physical as well as spiritual. Pagan religions may differ in their approach or method of relating to the Ultimate Divine Being. Different pagan religions may worship vastly different multitude of spirits and entities, but underlying these diversities is a deep philosophy (which is rarely articulated) of reverence for nature. The philosophy emphasizes the divinity of nature as a cosmic whole of which human beings are a part. Pagan worship, rituals, festivals and customs are attempts to develop spiritual, emotional and physical bonding with nature. A pagan aims to observe, understand, experience, feel and internalize each element of nature in every possible way. Again, this is in total contrast with Christianity and Islam. An invading Muslim King is supposed to have ordered the burning of a massive ancient library in Egypt, since all that is worth knowing is contained in the Holy Book. In a similar vein, Christians destroyed centuries of traditional knowledge in the name of witch hunting.

It is obvious that an approach based on one-book has to necessarily lead to a closed mind – faith being the mechanism used for sealing the windows and doors of mind. One has to have faith in the book and not reason against it. And just in case faith starts losing to reason, there is the fear of death to reinforce faith. All one-book-based religions have at some time or the other enforced strict laws against blasphemy and heretics (providing capital punishment), while there are no accounts of such laws being passed in pagan regimes. The nature of paganism, where each person has a one-to-one communication with the Cosmic Being, permits diversity, debate and disagreement.

Christianity, Islam and Judaism – each one claims to have the objective truth, while denying the version of truth espoused by the other. Paganism is more subjective – no one is supposed to claim to have the total and ultimate truth. In fact, under paganism truth is a journey, rather than a destination. In this respect, paganism is like science.

Not many in the Western World will see paganism as science and Christianity (or Islam) as anti-science. Scientists do not generally accept the existence of spirits and the concept of cosmic divinity – two prominent features of pagan religions. After all one cannot provide any concrete evidence for the existence of spirits or cosmic divinity and common understanding is that science accepts only those facts as true for which there is undisputed evidence. Let us come back to what is science and what is not science a bit later.

Spirits and cosmic divinity are prominent features of paganism, but the more important feature of paganism is its emphasis on observation, experience, and knowledge. Without the shackles imposed by what is written in the Holy Book, the mind is free to roam and explore. Western world prospered after the Renaissance since it broke out of the medieval mindset imposed by the Church.



Statue of The Goddess Athena (The Goddess of Knowledge) by Phidias

Spiritual or cosmic view aspects of Paganism may or may not be explicitly accepted in the western world today, but at a practical level the reigning philosophy of western world is pagan and not Christian or Muslim or Jew. Faith, as opposed to reason, is no longer sufficiently strong in the western mind for it to blindly accept all that is contained in the Holy Book. Scientists, who deny the creation of universe by God in six days at some time around 3000 BC (or 4000 or 5000 BC), are neither burnt at the stakes nor ridiculed. Theories of evolution of species, though rejected by Church, are taught in all schools of Europe and America. Sociologists, psychologists, jurists and all other professionals do not look at the Bible to get the answers to their questions.

In the western world today, the paradox is that even those who get their marriages solemnized by a Christian priest and get their children baptized believe in evolution and reject the worldview of the Church. It appears that the old split-up of life between the King and Church has taken on a different form in the western world.

In the western mind, now, life is divided in two parts – secular and religious. No Church accepts the division. Yet, for a western person, there are subjects and issues for which one looks for answers towards the Church and for the rest one goes somewhere else. The dividing line is not sharp and each person defines the line as per one's own sense of conviction. But there is no denying that the line exists in the mind of every western person.

Christianity, Islam and Judaism lay claim on the whole mind of each of their believers. The fact is that in modern western world, much of a person's mind and life is outside the control

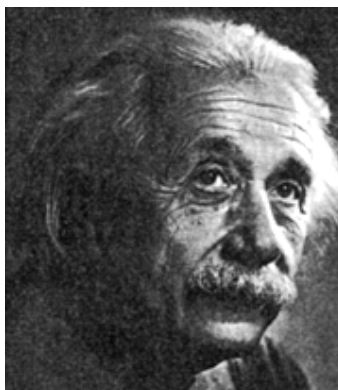
of Church (Islam and Judaism are small minorities, and here we are talking of mainstream). So even though a person may be known by a Christian name, he / she is Christian to a small degree only. If we look at the dictionary definition of 'heretic' and if we consider the way Church has traditionally defined a 'heretic', the modern western mind is more heretic than Christian. In other words, western world is more pagan than Christian.

E. Science & scientific temperament

Science evolved in Europe and America during the past few centuries as the iron hold of Church loosened. Initial developers of science had to encounter proactive opposition of the Church. There are innumerable instances of persecution and even execution of scientists, just because they held views that were considered heretic by the Church. Science grew, in spite of all opposition, because it could deliver results in terms of prosperity to the society. Massive transfer of resources from colonies aided the march of science and technology.

Even though scientific discoveries and technological innovations were changing the face of the world, science avoided taking a holistic view of the world or of society. Scientists had (and generally speaking still have) a fragmented view. A scientist focuses on one problem, draws its boundaries and closes his eyes to all that is outside the boundary lines drawn by him.

Epistemology of science is based on **Law of Positive Truth** – which states that every positive truth needs to be supported by evidence. The corollary of this is interpreted to mean that negative truth needs no evidence. If I have to prove that there is a mango tree in the ground opposite my house, I need to show either the tree or a photograph of the tree or have some people testify that they have seen the truth. On the other hand, if I say that there is no mango tree in the park opposite my house, I do not need to provide any evidence. Taken in a different context, Law of Positive Truth can be used to deny the existence of God. There is neither any evidence to prove that God exists, nor any evidence to show that God does not exist; so a scientist is supposed to follow Law of Positive Truth and deny the existence of God. However, in practical terms, a scientist just evades the question of existence of God, which is easy because it falls outside the boundary conditions set by each scientist.



The fragmented view focused within convenient boundaries helped science resist the onslaught of Church in initial years. But over time, scientists are discovering that they cannot push inconvenient questions under the carpet. Can a scientist who contributed to the making of the nuclear bombs, which destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, escape from the moral

responsibility for the same? What is moral responsibility in scientific terms? Is it possible to answer such questions without taking a holistic view? Can one take a holistic view, which is non-religious? These questions have been bothering scientists in the past century. They have been unable to come up with any consensus answer. It appears that scientific methodology has encountered its waterloo when it comes to answering some of the fundamental questions concerning mankind.

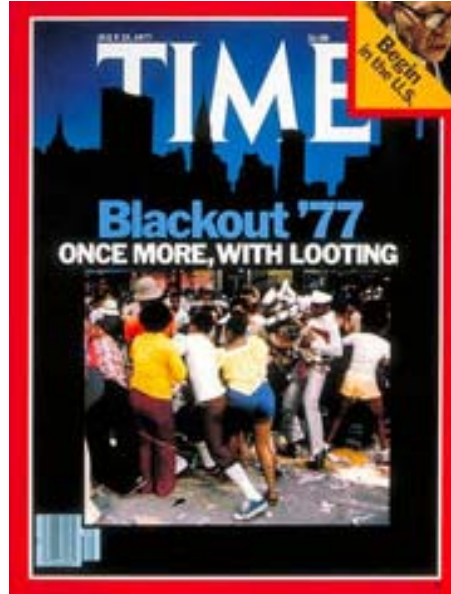


Victim of Hiroshima

The failure of science, which is the ruling ideology of modern western world, to provide a schema for human existence and behaviour has led to a peculiar situation. There is a vacuum as western mind sheds away Church-ordained beliefs and does not find all the answers from science. At this point Law of Positive Truth gives way to **Law of Convenient Truth**, which states – “In the absence of sufficient evidence for either affirming or denying a statement, accept what is more convenient”. This principle of convenience is used by the western mind, bereft of any moral or religious shackles, to unabashedly pursue self-interest individually and collectively.



The only shackles that the western mind seems to accept are those imposed by power equations. Having cast away the moral values that Church used to preach (and still preaches), there are no internal pressures within a western man's mind forcing him to abstain from acts that may be immoral or even criminal. With this mentality, one does not commit a crime only because there are the police and judiciary. If one is reasonably sure of police inaction, one has no hesitation in pilfering or looting or raping or even murdering.



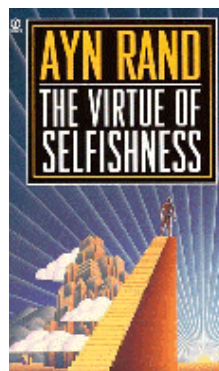
It is not surprising that western world has much higher crime rate than developing countries of Asia (<http://www.samarthbharat.com/unicristatistics.htm>), even though the police-population ratio is much higher in Europe and America than in Asia. As and when there are situations when police cannot be effective, violence in western world jumps up still higher and becomes explosive. One is reminded of the July 1977 blackout of New York when 25 hours of power breakdown provided an opportunity for mass arson, looting and other crimes. There have been blackouts in New York after 1977 (last major one was on 15 August 2003) and now the police are better equipped to handle blackouts, so there is no collapse of law and order in a blackout. But in other situations, where police cannot intervene effectively, lawlessness continues to rage – domestic violence is a typical example.



In Section B (Romans and Tribes), we saw that Roman and Greek civilizations were based on selfish pursuit of luxury at the cost of poor slaves and country folks. This tradition inherited from the Romans and Greek was moderated to a small degree by Christian values of love and brotherhood (preached assiduously to masses for centuries). Church and Christianity have been considerably weakened in the Western World, while the new religions of rationality and science have gained enormous strength. But the new religions prescribe no morality and do not talk of achieving any purpose in life beyond the mundane.

Humanities and Social sciences like psychology and sociology also follow the fragmented approach of physical sciences. While these new sciences devote considerable attention to “what is”, they have no prescription for “what ought to be” on the most fundamental issues and even if they have any such prescriptions, more often than not such prescriptions are rooted in the cultural biases of western world and not based on any rational systematic approach. I remember attending a course on Abnormal psychology many years ago when I was a teenager. Sophisticated data collection and statistical analysis techniques have been used to map what majority of men and women do in various situations. This majority behaviour is labeled as ‘normal’; everything else is ‘abnormal’. At this point the learned psychologists make an intellectual jump – normal is considered as desirable and abnormal is classified as a diseased person requiring medical attention. Even as a teenager, I found this obsession with being a part of statistical majority as ridiculous, if not stupid. I tried to tell this to my learned teacher, who had just returned from USA. She brushed me aside.

Morality and value systems based on psychology, sociology or economics are full of many ridiculous assumptions that are rarely stated explicitly. More often than not one encounters such contradictory suggestions and advice that one is forced to throw up one’s hands in exasperation. No society can live without morality and value systems. In the western world, in the absence of any morality based on a holistic view of society and life, basic animal instincts of selfishness has taken over. Of course, the tradition from Greek and Roman civilizations to the brutal pursuit of power by Church has contributed to this move towards a society where everyone exerts to maximize one’s own pleasures. This process has been further strengthened by authors like Ayn Rand, who unabashedly argue for selfishness.



Probably at no point in human history, there has been a civilization as devoted to selfishness as today’s western civilization is. At an individual level, each person pursues his / her own selfish goals without any consideration for others. At the collective level, the country or state does the same. If you have read Ayn Rand, you will believe that this is most rational and scientific.

Science and scientific temperament in western world has led on one hand to embracing of selfishness. On the other hand, the exasperation with collapse of social structures and family values has led to a journey back to religion, spirituality and Christianity. Orthodox religious groups have a higher presence, today, in USA than compared to ten years ago. In a way the western world has gone the full circle and is in a stage, which can be called the anti-thesis of renaissance.

Science and technology are still viewed as the providers of new gadgets, instruments and gizmos. But no one believes that science and scientific temperament can provide a new morality or can help provide purpose to the life of a generation, which faces existentialist dilemmas, more than the previous ones.



Around half a century ago, Bertrand Russell and others were proudly announcing philosophies based on scientific method and style. Around the same time, existentialist philosophers and authors were writing melancholic books about alienation and meaninglessness. Existentialist authors have fallen out of favour since their brilliant elucidation of the problem, though interesting and gripping, failed to offer any solutions. Similarly, Russell and all those swearing by science, dazzled everyone with their intellectual prowess, but failed to provide any solutions.

F. Summing Up

Towards the end of nineteenth century, Nietzsche said, “God is dead”. Less than a century later, another philosopher said, “God is dead, Marx is dead and I don’t feel so good myself”. But in the world of ideas, nothing ever dies. Christian Churches and Kings killed millions of pagans through centuries, but they could not kill paganism. Communists tried to kill Christianity in Russia, but they too failed.

In any society, there always is a diversity of cross currents and under currents. No society or civilization is ever monolithic. In the western world, God – as defined by various Churches – lives on, just as Marx and communism continue to breathe in the hearts of millions of Russians in spite of the fall of USSR. Along with God is the institution of Church – surely, reduced to a shadow of its grand (and scary) past, but still with the same genetic structure as

it had a few centuries ago. In some countries, at a political level, Christianity and Church are getting back to center stage. George W Bush prays more often and more publicly than any US President in the middle of last century did. On the other hand, there are more Church-less Christians, atheists and pagans in USA and Europe than ever before.

Paganism is alive and kicking all over Europe and America, even among the Church-going Christians. Not many Church-going Christians are comfortable with the rising influence of orthodox Christian groups in political decision-making. Many of them would like to have a sharper division of secular and spiritual functions – keeping the Church restricted to spiritual arena.

Christianity, Paganism and scientific temperament – all three are influenced in Europe and America by the most important value of Greek and Roman city-states – unbridled pursuit of wealth, pleasures and luxuries. Some people call it consumerism. Ayn Rand calls it selfishness and declares it to be a virtue. Whether you see it as a virtue or vice depends on your perspective and value system. But, it surely is the most fundamental characteristic of western civilization.

Another key characteristic of western civilization is violence. An American friend once told me that it is interesting to see Indians fight on the streets – there is so much sound and fury but hardly any blood. In contrast, when Americans fight, the only sound that is heard is of gunshots and blood flows more easily than Heinz ketchup does in nearby restaurants.

Greek / Roman city-states, Christianity and science – all of them have a history of perpetrating violence. Pagans were at the receiving end of violence through the past two thousand years of development of western civilization. Whether as receivers or as perpetrators, every stream of western civilization has been exposed to so much violence that most oriental thinkers cannot even imagine.

Another feature of western mind that oriental thinkers find very disconcerting is arrogance. Hinduism, Buddhism and almost all pagan religions teach a person to be humble; one is taught to believe that learning is a never-ending process and in this journey as the circle of one's knowledge expands one comes into contact with more of one's ignorance. This is diametrically opposite of what every one-book-based religion teaches – one needs to just learn The Holy Book and one has all knowledge and there is no ignorance whatsoever. Anyone who believes that he / she has complete knowledge is bound to be free of all doubts and, as a result, becomes extremely arrogant.



Arrogance, selfishness and wealth amassed from centuries of colonialism make a deadly combination in anyone's head and western mind is no exception.

Let me at this point, before I close for the day, quote from Samuel P. Huntington (<http://www.alamut.com/subj/economics/misc/clash.html>)

Civilization identity will be increasingly important in the future, and the world will be shaped in large measure by the interactions among seven or eight major civilizations. These include Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African civilization. The most important conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating these civilizations from one another.

The central axis of world politics in the future is likely to be, in Kishore Mahbubani's phrase, the conflict between "the West and the Rest" and the responses of non-Western civilizations to Western power and values.

The fault lines that Samuel P Huntington talks about are not unreal. But, let us not forget that the western civilization has its own internal fault lines. If one looks at the history of the past one thousand years, more blood has been shed on the lands (and by the people of these lands) that are supposed to be presently under the influence of western civilization, than on lands under any other civilization. This bloodshed was on one hand due to clash of currents in the western world (Christianity, Paganism and Science) and on the other hand was due to Greek city-state mentality characterized by selfishness, greed, arrogance and a mindset of violence.

In the past thousand years, inter-civilization conflict was more often not a result of Greek city-state mentality of the West or of West Asia. In a significant number of cases the conflicts were due to attempts by ruling elites of various one-book-based religions to carve out more territory and followers by violence. There are hardly any instances of pagan religions invading and initiating bloodshed.

Europe and America are much richer now than they ever were. Rich people always look more beautiful, more intelligent, more sensible, more polished, more sophisticated than they actually are. Inherent in it is the danger that the west faces today. They believe that they are no longer what they were a hundred years ago – then they were not so rich and now they are, but that's not how they look at themselves. They genuinely believe that they have changed their cultural genetic structure in the past hundred years and have grown intellectually to become more responsible and less war-prone. But have they?

ANIL CHAWLA

12 July 2005

Postscript

Does the sun go round the earth or is it the other way round? This question was asked to three persons. The first one was sitting on the sun – he replied that earth goes round the sun. The second person was sitting on earth – in his view sun goes round the earth. The third person sitting on a distant star observed that earth goes round the sun. All three persons were speaking the truth. The man who said that the sun goes round the earth is neither wrong nor unscientific.

The most important lesson, which I learnt in my first course in Physics (PH 101) as a student at IIT, is that there can be no observation without an observer and there is no such thing as an objective truth, independent of observer.

My understanding of western civilization is based on my cultural, religious and historical vantage point. Of course, it is also affected by the limitations of my small knowledge base and intellectual capabilities. I make no claims of offering any objective indisputable truths. I have only presented most humbly my view, which may well be wrong at various points.

I was attracted to the idea of writing this after my recent visit to Switzerland. My trip was fully sponsored by a Swiss business family who wanted to collaborate for a business venture in India. Things went smooth in the first three days. We were able to agree on all key points. A Draft of proposed Memorandum of Understanding providing for a partnership was prepared. On the morning when we were supposed to sign the MOU, the Swiss family backed out citing 2Cor.6V14 of Bible (apparently, it states that a Christian and non-Christian should not be partners). I was astounded.

I had always thought that Christians had moved out of the dark medieval mindset into renaissance's sunrise. I was wrong. In this case the Swiss family was willing to forego three years of work and thousands of dollars of investment just because of a verse in Bible.

In the mini-book on western civilization, which is in your hands I have attempted to be dispassionate but that is not always possible. I make no apologies for my views or passions. I only wish to clarify that I have no intentions of causing any hurt or insult or injury. And if I have caused so, I regret and apologize.



Anil Chawla

Websites

www.samarthbharat.com
www.hindustanstudies.com
www.indialegalhelp.com

E-mail id's

hindustanstudies@gmail.com
hindustanstudies@rediffmail.com
indialegalhelp@yahoo.co.in