"Faith and Culture: Widening our Horizons"

'Common Skies, Divided Horizons'*

Abstract

Following the trail of critical and postcolonial approaches to cultural relations, this paper will explore aspects of the complexities in the relationship between faith and culture. The first part will look at how the two have interacted through the human spirit in opening up spaces for creativity, dialogue and visions of hope. The second part will look at how opportunities for human development have been closed down by the invocation of faith and culture, leading to the impoverishment and death of people and their cultural identities. In conclusion, it will attempt a resolution of these contrasting readings based on historical and current events and interpretations, gesturing at a way forward.

*I. Chambers and L. Curti (eds.), 1995. *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons,* London: Routledge

I. Introduction: faith and culture in conflicting horizons

The metaphor of horizons evokes various memories of physical and textual encounters of different plains of action, interpretation and reflection. Disagreement and tension may emerge from the occultation of one level of experience or representation by another. Sometimes, the lack of harmony may lead to outright opposition. In the text that has given this paper its name, Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (1995: xi) argue that, in spite of any clashes rising from approaches that may seem to be irreconcilable, researchers that travel through writing are 'nevertheless bound into a frame of reference that exposes us all to a series of interrogations which - as intellectuals, citizens and historical beings - we can no longer refuse or ignore.'

Interestingly, this text was published only two years after the first elucidation of the thesis popularly known as 'the clash of civilisations' by Samuel P. Huntington (1993). In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union that brought an apparently American victorious end to the Cold War, close ties were drawn between faith systems and civilisational ones to explain the geopolitical map of the world unfolding on the eve of the new millenium. New horizons were being drawn on atlases, explored in literature and travelled geographically for political, economic and financial conquest. In an ironic recurrence of history, this 'brave new world', to quote Aldous Huxley,[1] seemed to revisit the Spanish conquest of the Americas, driving colonial expansionism through divine invocations to "gold, God and glory". This expression recalls the richly illustrated publication by John Dyson and Peter Christopher marking the five hundredth anniversary of the voyage of Christopher Columbus across the Atlantic, aptly titled *Columbus: For Gold, God and Glory*, which I leafed through incessantly in younger years.[2]

Therefore, half a millenium later, Huntington (1993) adopted a civilisational lens with which to decipher and delineate different groupings of people, expressing himself in this way:

> 'It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.'

[1] Huxley, A. 1932. *Brave New World,* HarperCollins: New York.
[2] Dyson, J. and Christopher, P. 1991. *Columbus: For Gold, God and Glory,* Simon & Schuster: New York.

The context within which this divisionary, classificatory approach to humankind, arguably necessary, operated, led to various observers invoking several layers of influence between matters of faith, culture and political alignments. On the one hand, US media companies dedicated a growing number of news stories, analyses and reviews to the calamitous aspects of such a perceived clash. By means of illustration, one may mention the case of a report by Breitbart in February 2018, where the Iraqi Chaldean Archbishop of Erbil was quoted as embedding the violence of Islamic State (IS) fighters in the persecution of Christians by Muslims already taking place at the inception of Islam in seventh century Arabia (Williams 2018). In April 2016, The Catholic World Report published an article by the prolific American writer and Jesuit James Vincent Schall wherein, adopting a politically realist, Augustinian-inspired approach to historical interfaith relations, violence is recognised as an intrinsic underpinning of the Muslim religion (Schall 2016). Online sources and magazines like TIME and Newsweek regularly reflect, somewhat sensationally, on the religious cleavages that separate people, with particular attention paid to Huntington's thesis and the separation between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Finally, in September 2006, world media attention focused on a specific extract from the lecture given by Pope Benedict XVI in Regensburg, thereby pouring fuel over the virulent sentiment that had been brewing among Muslim communities worldwide in the wake of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.[3]

II. Recurring horizons in the Mediterranean space

The Mediterranean geographic and imaginary space lies at the heart of a great deal of the exchange of ideas and interpretations that try to look at the interaction between matters of faith and culture. The current rate of debate is intense, but this is not new. Henry Frendo (2005: 161) argues that the Mediterranean may consist of both divisionary and unifying elements, possibly in equal measure. He notes that religion plays a crucial role in the definition of the Mediterranean identities. However, he also gestures ahead, when saying that the:

> 'three competing western-moving religious cults to which the Mediterranean gave birth always meant to adore the same one God; alas how many misdeeds have been committed in his name. They are all, according to the Koran, people of the book (*ahl al-kitab*), all pledged religiously to do good and to shun evil. However important it may still be in varying degrees, religion is by no means its sole defining socio-cultural quality'.

Arguably, the relationship faith has developed, over the centuries, with cultural aspects such as traditions, markers of intangible heritage and various means of cultural expression may attract our attention to address more fully the impact of faith on human relations today.

Danilo Zolo traces back the historiography of the Mediterranean in modern researchers to Henri Pirenne and Fernand Braudel. He compares their differing perceptions of the role of cultural harmony within the Mediterranean space, by contrasting, on the one hand, Pirenne's belief in the divisionary power stemming from the Islamic conquest of the Southern Mediterranean and the Iberian peninsula with, on the other hand, Braudel's greater appreciation of Islamic culture and its contribution to the richness of the Mediterranean, including possible seeds of unity. Zolo further draws upon the work of Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, particularly *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*, published in 2000, who follow in Braudel's steps to analyse aspects of unity in the Mediterranean composed of its different, and sometimes fragmented and fragmentary cultures (Cassano and Zolo 2007: 15). Interestingly for the purposes of this paper, the authors explore the 'geography of religion', considering behavioural patterns of settlement, trade and migration in relation to 'the religion of boundary and belonging' (Horden and Purcell 2000: 401).

[3] The text of the address is accessible here: http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html [accessed 21 October 2018].

The debate on whether the cumulative effect of the relation between faith and culture, the two of many elements contributing to human dynamics in the Mediterranean space being focused on here, does not seem to be destined to foreclosure. As with all journeys towards horizons, one's pursuit to an end, is endless. Frendo (2005: 172) first refers to Albert Camus, the subject of a seminar by Anthony Aquilina earlier in this very series,[4] to illustrate the open-endedness of this debate, before moving on to Horden and Purcell for the same purpose. He writes:

> 'Albert Camus may have been dreaming when he saw the Mediterranean as a role model for coexistence, because clearly this sea has been as much of a divider as it has been of a unifier. In a partial critique of Braudel's more holistic thesis, Horden and Purcell would argue that in the twentieth-century modernization has had a disintegrating effect.'

Paul Balta (1992: 22) notes that, historically, Mediterranean societies have striven for difference and asserted their characteristics, even though they could not help sharing identities and copying one another. In spite of the strong urge to differentiate oneself from the other, 'few regions in the world witness such a mix of races and blood and cultures mutually bred.' The French writer and journalist, born in Alexandria in 1929, calls the capacity of each people to maintain its identity the 'Mediterranean miracle'. Therefore, he argues, identities have changed over time, but have also persisted. He stresses the historical links in civilisational and cultural expression with reference to the Ancient Greeks being tied to Pharaonic Egypt, and onwards to Byzantium and Islam. In his analysis, Balta argues that the Mediterranean springs from three sources. These are the Greco-Roman element, the Judeo-Christian one, and the Arab-Muslim dimension. Balta applies this matrix to both Europe and Arab lands and resists further compartmentalisation. He argues that the formation and mutual influence among cultural identities stemming from faith systems permeate and infuse all peoples albeit in different ways and to different degrees.

John Baldacchino (2010: 4) proceeds to provide a good reflection on the meeting of horizons within the Mediterranean by invoking the idea of this space providing a home to many people, both from within and outside it. The Maltese professor in arts education comments on the perennial need for 'homecoming' which characterises people with links to the Mediterranean, be they both outside as well as inside the space, and draws a common thread among them:

> 'Before the longing for a lost past, nostalgia gets from *nóstos* the notion of homecoming, where what animates the journey is the return – knowing, as Constantine Cavafy tells us in his poetry, that we want to keep the journey going as much as we can, because any sense of return always remains with us. In this we could assume that the narrative of the journey and the polity of doubt come together as the nostalgic return to an end that is historically postponed.'

Therefore, Baldacchino argues that the journey is more important than actually making it home, and the journey which feeds the idea of "going home" needs to be maintained in order to inspire the feelings related to return; the end is postponed, otherwise the sense of returning is ended through completion. Therefore, the homebound traveller postpones the arrival to delay the end of the journey and thus keep fuelling the nostalgia for home and the related experiences and creativity bound to this particular positioning in time and space.[5]

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[4] https://www.um.edu.mt/newspoint/events/umevents/2018/06/staugustineandalbertcamus [accessed 21 October 2018].

[5] It is ironic that the concept of and expression "go home" have become a mainstay of xenophobic rhetoric against people and communities assumed to "belong" elsewhere. This applies to migrants but has significantly also been targeting tourists, as analysed in Hughes, N. 2017. ''Tourists go home': anti-tourism industry protest in Barcelona', Social Movement Studies, https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2018.1468244 [accessed 21 October 2018].

Regarding the concept of homecoming in the works of artists, Baldacchino (2010: 63) adds:

> 'In Cavafy, Seferis and Angelopoulos – not to mention Agamemnon and Odysseus – homecoming remains a perennial attachment to the Mediterranean's aesthetic representation. Yet the image of the exiled is not aesthetical, but profoundly ethical.'

While the Mediterranean may provide many with a home or a sense of a home, no one home is like the other. The differences which mark the space are important as they provide a resource to the people who inhabit it. Baldacchino invites the reader to consider how the narratives of modernity have 'inhabited' and defined the Mediterranean as a common cultural horizon, yet founded on difference. Nevertheless, he does not harbour any illusions on how the space is 'shared'. Instead, also invoking Camus, he identifies 'the light' that Mediterranean men and women 'have been able to keep.' We are reminded that Camus' vision is qualified with a desire that becomes admonition: 'just as the Mediterranean sun is the same for all men, the effort of men's intelligence should be a common inheritance and not a source of conflicts and murders.'

Finally, Baldacchino (2010: 19) relates the Mediterranean to its boundaries with reference to Braudel by noting that even when the French historian writes with the precise intent of focusing on a specific period, his 'work presents the 'Mediterranean World' as a story that transcends the boundaries of particularity, whether this has to do with geography or the story of 'events'.' Baldacchino goes on to argue that:

> '[t]o look at history's horizon is to engage in a continuum that presents itself as a permanent race between Achilles and the tortoise where any argument for a closure of history's meaning proves to be a fallacy. When it comes to the Mediterranean, the lesson is further radicalized at source: "If the Mediterranean has done no more than force us out of our old habits it will already have done us a service."'

III. Faith and culture: widening horizons

The return to traditional cultural sources, in a way that inspires the pursuit of novel routes, may be a way of seeking an innovation of lifestyle, cultural expression and relation to faith as evoked by Baldacchino. Classical figures of Antiquity, and their ephemeral presence in later, still current, monotheistic belief systems, emerge in contexts that are exciting in the way they have been experiencing new ways of communicating, connecting and making waves on an international, cultural level. For instance, the role of Jewish and Christian imagery in Caribbean popular culture has been extensively studied with reference to Bob Marley's Rastafarianism (Dawes 2002). In *Exodus*, his ninth studio album released in 1977, the journey home of the 'Jah people' is linked to the plea for 'another brother Moses' to lead it across the Red Sea.

In February 2018, Pulitzer prize-winning Black American hip hop artist Kendrick Lamar plucked various religious strings in the video to the song 'All the Stars', the first single from the album accompanying the movie *The Black Panther*.[6] Therein he intertwines the liberating figure of Moses, once again called to lead the Jewish slaves across the Red Sea, with the dark Classical myth of Charon, the ferryman of the god of death Hades, who carries souls across the Styx, the river to hell, or the underworld, and in turn to the Ancient Egyptian Celestial Ferryman known as the Sailor of the Dead, in what is a multi-layered interpretation and representation of Black American culture today. The significance of faith and culture in opening the horizon to freedom is eloquent in the following words from the song:

[6] https://soundssobeautiful.net/2018/02/14/kendrick-lamar-sza-all-the-stars-meaning-highlight-of-the-african-civilization/ [accessed 21 October 2018].

‘Forgotten history, forgotten legacy,
Facts of the past sure can influence our future
‘Fore they can face the truth, my people fades to black
Back against the wall, living in a world in war.
Ignorance the number one cause of death
Knowledge and faith the only wealth worth collecting
Culture saved from the shade, Black slaves finally free.’

IV. Faith and culture: narrowing horizons

In May of this year, an arguably more chilling, and less hopeful, portrayal of Black America drawing on faith and culture came from Donald Glover, also known as Childish Gambino. Although it is difficult to identify one particular moment, in his video to the song ‘This is America’, various elements of the dysfunctional relationship between conflicting expectations and interpretations of American society arguably climax in the cold-blooded shooting of a religious gospel choir.[7] The imagery used, even to depict the killing of a Black man evoking anti-terrorism action taken to the extreme, widens our horizon, this time with negative undertones, and connects us with the devastation and annihilation of people, and their religious and cultural expression, on the basis of their faith and culture, across the world.

In February of this year, professor of archaeology Paola Brusasco (2018) published his latest tome of analytical research into the preservation of cultural heritage for its intrinsic worth, and for its intangible value to humanity. In it, he reports on his first-hand encounters with the people suffering the calculated devastation of Ancient heritage sites in the Middle East by IS, and the ongoing efforts by the same people to rescue, restore and reassert various sites and structures in Syria and Iraq at the heart of the communities living there. The reading is grim, since the targeted destruction of the tangible heritage in Bosra, Mosul and Palmyra, among others, has annihilated many important physical links to the cultural roots and collective memory of the populations of these places. Often, the people themselves have suffered a similar fate, or have had to flee for their lives. Brusasco shows over and over again how faith and culture have been used as local targets to shatter any sense of identity that does not fall strictly in line with Islamist views in a way that captures maximum international attention. Together with the grizzly killings and military operations, the wipe out of several sites and artefacts, when not trafficked to the West to raise significant funds on antiquity black markets, makes a harsh statement about pre-Islamic expressions of faith, and colonial archaeological expeditions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries perceived as perfidiously demeaning the true interpretation of the faith.

Ironically, in another recent publication, Catherine Nixey (2017) carries out thorough research to point out that such religiously-motivated destruction of heritage as that described by Brusasco is one other moment of historical cyclicality. In *The Darkening Age*, she records the meticulous destruction of Classical heritage by a recent hoard of violent people who would not tolerate diversity fanatically imposing their own belief system on others, namely the first Christians. Her detailed research and its interpretation in a historical context, like Brusasco, also make for challenging reading. The destruction and appropriation of others’ religions and cultures, by interpreting temples, statues and other forms of tangible expression as a threat to be eliminated and exploited, is a very dark aspect of humanity, and instills the appreciation of faith systems through cultural means with a great deal of sobriety.

[7] https://soundssobeautiful.net/2018/05/14/donald-glover-this-is-america-paints-a-historical-picture-to-the-culture-meaning/ [accessed 21 October 2018].

V. In search of a resolution

In another read that is certainly tough, yet full of human fortitude, Primo Levi (1958) narrates his experience as an Italian Jew at the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz. He then proceeds to describe his incredible journey across Europe, back home, taking in the apocalyptic human and physical environment immediately after the Second World War. Even before then, the presence of the image of a horizon to look out for is present. One of its most striking and poignant uses is in describing the lining up of the humanity he was sharing the atrocious enslaved conditions with in the otherwise uninhabited forests of Germany and Poland, evoking despair, yet also hope (Levi 1958: 55):

> 'siamo noi, grigi e identici, piccoli come formiche e grandi fino alle stelle, serrati l'uno contro l'altro, innumerevoli per tutta la pianura fino all'orizzonte'.[8]

The northern European plain that saw many atrocities acted out more than seventy years ago has offered people trying to engage with that past and move on the possibility of doing so in the context of cultural programmes such as the initiative supported by the European Union that sees cities address their cultural environments through the title of European Capital of Culture. For example, in 2010 the German industrial town of Essen achieved a remarkable feat in addressing past traumas that are still present by taking on the challenge of singing together in large numbers. For many years such singing was stigmatised due to its exploitation by the Nazi regime. In one particular project, tens of thousands of people came together in the large football stadia of the Ruhr region to try to overcome inhibitions and recover community ties through a profession of the arts. In another instance, large, yellow hot-air balloons were hoisted over tens of closed mining sites, stretching far out into the horizon, in an effort to connect one's past industrial heritage with a prospect for the future. And yet in another, thousands of people took to the highways to share their supper in a communal manifestation that stretched across many kilometres. Such large-scale mobilisation efforts, albeit organised, echo the so-called Singing Revolution in neighbouring Estonia, and the Baltic Way, or Baltic Chain, bringing together millions of people around the time of the demise of Soviet control over the Baltic states at the end of the Cold War.

VI. Conclusion: open horizons

It is often said that history repeats itself. It is reputed that Mark Twain disagreed, expressing his intuition that rather, it rhymes with itself.[9] If one adopts a cyclical interpretation of happenings,[10] one may lower oneself into a recurring current of signifiers and meanings that refresh ideas and conceptions and may trace a path towards some means of resolution. At the end of a searching expedition, the way home is often, both in real terms, as well as in narratives of fiction, a familiar trope to conclude a story. Chambers and Curti (1995: xi) take us down such an inspirational route to reflect on the interrelation of ourselves with our understanding of each other:

> 'Whether apparently coming from another world into the one we are most familiar with (but what world now is not in some profound sense also a part of our own, and we of theirs), or emerging within the very languages and streets of 'our' cities to disturb or disorient us, the emergence of other voices, desires and bodies reveals a sense of culture and politics, of history and identity, that can no longer be referred to the old myths that once assured us of our presence. Our previous sense of our selves, with its presumptions of centre and of 'home', has been irrevocably interrupted'.

[8] 'it is us again, grey and identical, small as ants, yet so huge as to reach up to the stars, bound one against the other, countless, covering the plain as far as the horizon' as translated by Stuart Woolf, *If this is a man*, 1959, The Orion Press: New York, 67.
[9] Eayrs, G.E. 1971. *Diplomacy and its discontents*, University of Toronto Press, 121.
[10] One such perception of the history of humanity is conveyed by John Gray in his 2018 publication *Seven Types of Atheism.*

Finally, a conclusion inspired by the theme of horizons would not be complete without a reference to Western movies. There is one movie in particular that captures some of the essence of the thoughts put forward in this paper, while keeping the door open, even if slightly ajar. That is John Ford's *The Searchers*. Nolan Moore (2015) notes how it starts off with Ethan Edwards, played by John Wayne, riding in from the breathtaking horizon stretching away into Monument Valley, Texas where the story is set in 1868. We see Edwards approach through an opening doorway, returning home from his Confederate mission, unaware he is about to set on a new one, that is, to seek his niece, intending to find and kill her, after having spent most of her adult life with the Comanches, murderers of their family. However, at the end of the film, the scene is played out again, this time with Wayne bringing Nathalie Wood, playing the niece as a young woman, back home. The desert horizon is there again, framed through the door, this time shutting the lone hero, and the unrequited environment, out of the family haven, or what is left of it and has been rebuilt.

Apparently there is a lesson to be learn, as in any morality tale, about the power of self-discovery and awareness, that comes with the journey itself. There is also an element of conciliation to be experienced. However, not everything is rounded out to perfection. We do not see the cowboy ride out into the distance, nor does the horizon hold hope of new, exciting beginnings. With hindsight, we also know better, partly by being aware that we do not know everything. This is not meant in a historical sense, since by 1956, the year the movie was made, the extent of the violence against American Indians by the settlers was known. However, it was not yet recognised, studied and debated. What we do know today does not equate with simpler solutions, or the assumption that more knowledge leads to having more tools with which to address conflict. Nevertheless, it gives us awareness of historical happenings and cultural contexts that may lead to a more humble approach towards knowledge, and a deeper thirst for curiosity and understanding (Garcés 2017: 8).

The author wishes to thank Rev. Dr. John Berry for the opportunity to explore this subject matter, Prof. Saviour Catania for having opened so many doors onto film, Dr. Anthony Pace for many recent engaging exchanges on the value of culture, and Ivana Busuttil and Serena Ann Xuereb for their timely insights into American hip hop.

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