**Victor Segesvary, Dialogue of Civilizations: An Introduction to Civilizational Analysis; Boston: University Press of America; pp. 132; Cloth $49.00: paper$27.50.**

In his The Interpretation of Cultures, Cliford Geertz raised the question "whether the dualism between empirically universal aspects of culture rooted in subcultural realities and empirically variable aspects not so rooted can be established and sustained". He adds that "the proposed universal be substantial ones and not empty or near-empty categories".

With radical globalization taking root; transforming cultural and other patterns in an unprecedented way, the question of interpreting across boundaries has an urgency which is, curiously, not often noticed. For, changes in economic and social (and above all, political) arenas are not, as the mass media make us believe, resisted or received in a vacuous manner which sustains glib generalizations. That Geertz's question remains just that is evident from books which come from the West in staggering numbers. Dialogue of Civilizations seems to confront the issues in a balanced and by and large cautious way.

Segesvary's introduction starts with the basic question of the need for a dialogue in our age, followed by an attempt to identify the various components of civilization such as religion, symbolism, concepts of time, myth, riiual, etc. From this emerges the necessary exploration of "Modernization and Civilizational Practices" which analyses social, economic and political aspects. The final part is on the Methodology of Civilizational Analysis. There is also an annex on "Tehran Declaration on Dialogue among Civilization, "

The overall tone and temper of the book tend to be specific. For instance, in his formulation of the "method of dialogue," Victor Segesvary cites Gadamer's distinction between "situation" and "horizon." The former is "a standpoint which limits the possibility of vision" and the latter constitutes "the range of vision comprising everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point, especially personal and collective memories." Thus, "participation in the Other's world promotes a unified vision of human life, action and community placed in a cosmic and evolutionary Segesvary.

These are very valid formulations. But one gets the impression that the sources for connoting what is meant by, for instance, "cosmic", "evolutionary", "culture" are (unconsciously?) still derived from Western paradigms. How difficult this issue is, is evident, for me at least, in Segesvary's comments on the Hindu concept Of dharma. In his discussion of "the atemporality," he raises this issue and describes what he decides as its two Hindu forms: the classical perspective, for him, "represents an unbroken perspective in which the predetermined and immutable order of things remains immune to the changes in the outer world and in the immediate environment. It demands from believers not to act in response to any worldly cause or motivation.

This creates, says Segesvary, "the fundamental inner dilemma of Hindu culture: on the one hand, dharma is considered universal and as such it must take into account worldly concerns and interests; on the other hand its atemporal character requires a total withdrawal from secular realities." Clinching the whole issue with enviable confidence and finality he declares that "in the Hindu tradition, the two cosmic spheres cannot be brought into harmony."

Dharma is a favourite hobby horse for Western (?) scholars. And its interpretation is always, to say the least, heavily weighted in the polarities of the secular and the sacred, of course, one can see here the shadow of the familiar binaries of the renouncer and the householder (a la Madan and others) but to declare that "the two cosmic spheres cannot be brought into harmony" is I think, going a bit too far into the abyss which threatens Western analyses. For instance, if the two spheres cannot be brought into harmony, then where is the question of the decline of dharma and the descent of the Avatara to set it right? Whenever dharma declines, says the Gita, and Avatara takes birth. Then how come dharma is seen as an impenetrable barrier for the harmony between the two spheres?

In fact, the Hindu paradigms are transpositional: sruti and smirit, sreyas and preyas, abhyudaya and nihsreyasa are never split off. If that is so, there will be little evidence of the ascetic's constant crossing of his boundaries to interact with the householder. Fortunately, there is a constant creative interaction between the renouncer and the community. Similarly, the cluster of values crystallized in the purusharthas hold the two spheres creatively without pathological privileging. Of course, the norms are not always existential. But then the primacy of reason in Western thought has not restrained it from colonizing the "developing" countries. Temporal and atemporal are very tempting civilizational and cultural categories to score off one structure against the other.

It seems to me that Segesvary ignores by simplifying complexity of cultures at several places. For instance, I find a curious absence of references to basic texts, at least the Hindu text, as A.K. Ramanujan in his stimulating essay questioning "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?" (Oxford, 1999, pp.34-51) shows, among other things, "the contextsensitive nature of dharma" drawing from both secular (literary) and sacred texts. He suggests that "texts may be historically dateless, anonymous: but their contexts, uses, efficacies are explicit." He points to the need to "attend to the context-sensitive designs that embed a seeming variety of modes (tale, discourse, poem, etc.), and materials...Not unity...but coherence seems to be the end." in short, dharma is constantly interrogated from becoming a straight Procrustean bed by the frames of Puranic tales.

I have concentrated, in my response to Segesvary's book, on Hindu categories to suggest that even a closely reasoned expositorily clearlywritten book can often find it difficult to avoid generalization. I found his observation, in his analysis on religion as the foundation of culture that "the spiritual anarchy...gives way to a new, mature civilizational synthesis, which may -often be attained only on the eve of the material decline of the civilization" quite intriguing and supports a perspective which, if not acceptable per se is full of potential,

I know it is possible to clarify •the points which I tried to raise. But that seems to me beside the point. For the perceptions of culture-analysists vis-à-vis the question of the Other are bound to be matters of dialectical contradistinctions stemming from respective world-views. What is undeniable is: Segesvary's book is an important contribution to this area and needs to be read by all those interested in dialogue both as a cerebral exercise and an existential agenda. One hardly expects more from an introduction.

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