

Chapter 1

Cultural Pluralism in the Context of the Knowledge Society Ecosystem: Reviews and Views

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ABSTRACT

With Huntington's warning of a "clash of civilizations" following the end of the cold war, "cultural pluralism" has become important for enhancing world peace and supporting development. In this paper, cultural pluralism is viewed as a "knowledge society" problem, where intercultural knowledge is produced, disseminated and used within an ecosystem of mutual understanding and respect. The authors present key cultural pluralisms efforts, providing an overall picture of the issues involved. These efforts include: the 2001 United Nations (UN) resolution on dialogue among civilizations; the 2001 UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declaration on cultural diversity; the 2005 Rabat conference on dialogue among cultures and civilizations; and the 2008 Madrid world conference on dialogue. In the second part of this paper, cultural pluralism issues are restructured according to the knowledge society ecosystem framework, where they are organized according to the five STOPE domains: strategy, technology, organization, people and the environment, and where they interact with the intercultural knowledge activities. The resulting cultural pluralism ecosystem framework is useful as a tool for organizing and interrelating future studies on the subject and promoting peace and development.

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INTRODUCTION

The subject of cultural diversity and pluralism is identified in this section, as a background for also introducing the paper. The conceptual issues of cultures and civilization are first presented. Recent concerns associated with the potential clash of civilizations, following the end of the cold war, are then addressed. This is followed by introducing the paper and its main objectives.

Cultures and Civilizations

The 19th century scholar Edward B. Taylor defined “culture” as “that complex whole which includes: knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society”. Other scholars of the same period, viewed “cultural evolution” as a process that includes three stages: savagery, barbarism, and civilization. The 20th century scholar V. Gordon Child viewed the third cultural stage, “civilization”, in terms of its cultural and technological achievements (“Academic American Encyclopedia,” 1981).

The Rabat commitment of 2005, shared by seven international organizations, and concerned with dialogue among cultures and civilizations has considered culture as “a frame of local belonging”; and civilization as a “phenomenon conferring a sense of recognition”, that is a sense of achievement (United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, 2005). Of course “religion” clearly resides in the core of culture and consequently in the core of civilization.

According to the previous thought, the concept of culture can be considered of general nature that incorporates religious issues, and that represents the base for civilization achievements. In this paper, the terms culture and civilization are used interchangeably. Considering culture or civilization, at the world level, “cultural diversity” would be the right term to describe its different societies. Samuel Huntington, who is a professor

at Harvard University, divided the world into eight main civilizations, with some other smaller ones, as given in Figure 1 (Wikipedia, 2008a).

Clash of Civilizations

In 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell, and the West was winning the cold war, with the former Soviet Union and its Eastern bloc, Francis Fukuyama, who is a professor at Johns Hopkins University, declared “the end of history”, claiming that the Western system is the final form of human governments for the whole world (Wikipedia, 2008b; Fukuyama, 1992). In 1993, Samuel Huntington did not agree with this theory, and expected cultural diversity to cause “clash of civilization” (Wikipedia, 2008a; Huntington, 1996). He classified the potential clash among the main eight civilizations to be of three levels: “high, medium and low”, as given in Figure 1.

Walter Russell Mead, who is a senior fellow at the US Council on Foreign Relations (Wikipedia, 2008c), which is a non-governmental organization, has a view that combines the ideas of both Fukuyama and Huntington. Like Huntington, he acknowledges cultural diversity, while in the mean time, like Fukuyama, he recognizes the importance of the western system and calls for other cultures to be able to peacefully interact with it (Mead, 2007). This paper emphasizes the need for global cultural “pluralism” that defuses the potential clashes, which may be caused by cultural diversity. The pluralism it advocates calls for the recognition and respect of all cultures, with equality and justice that lead to peaceful interaction among them.

The Paper

The paper looks at cultural diversity through the glass of the knowledge society ecosystem framework presented in Bakry (2008) and Bakry and Al-Ghamdi (2008). The main “knowledge activities” associated with cultural diversity are

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