

**Fr. Pawel Tarasiewicz**  
Adler-Aquinas Institute, USA

## **The West: Between Open Society and Clashing Civilizations**

The aim of this article is to show that by its very nature Western civilization is well suited for making a significant contribution to build the open society based on intercivilizational dialogue. In the age of global migration, there is an obvious need for developing tools which would effectively transform the threat of a clash of civilizations into a creative dialogue between them. As a civilization of the dialogue, Western civilization seems to be an appropriate instrument to meet that need.

The following reflections are divided into three parts which respectively address the questions: 1) Is there any connection between the idea of the open society and the heritage of Western civilization?, 2) Is liberal education an adequate means to resolve the paradoxes of the open society?, and 3) Why is the West an arena for the clash of civilizations?

### **Open Society and Western Civilization**

The term “open society” (Fr. “société ouverte”) was coined in 1932 by Henri Bergson and used in his book entitled *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*<sup>1</sup>. Bergson’s open society was temporal and

---

<sup>1</sup> See Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra, Cloudesley Brereton, W. Horsfall Carter, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977.

spatial: temporal – “because it remains to be realized in the future”, and spatial – “because it includes everyone presently living”<sup>2</sup>. Thus, the idea of the open society first appeared as a “dream of organizing all human beings presently living under one rule”<sup>3</sup>. In 1945, the term was taken over by Karl Popper to be developed in his book entitled *The Open Society and Its Enemies*<sup>4</sup>.

What analogy is there between Popper’s open society and Western civilization? The similarity between them can be shown by a correspondence between the views of Karl Popper and Robert M. Hutchins.

Hutchins, an associate of Mortimer Adler in the Great Books of the Western Civilization project, holds that the core essence of the West consists in holding intergenerational conversation which, having begun at the dawn of history, ceaselessly continues to the present day. Certainly, there are other civilizations which can boast impressive achievements in other fields, but no civilization is like that of the West in the field of intergenerational dialogue – there is no other civilization which can claim that its distinctive characteristic is a dialogue involving people of past, present and future generations; there is no dialogue in other civilizations which can be compared with that held in the West in regard to the number of great works of the mind that have contributed to this dialogue. Hutchins emphasizes that the purpose to which the West aspires is the civilization of the dialogue; that the spirit from which the West draws its civilizational power is the spirit of inquiry; that the essential element on which the West depends is the *logos*. Thus, in the West, nothing is to be left undiscussed; nobody is to silence his mind; no proposition is to remain unexamined; nothing but the exchange of ideas is held to be the proper path to the realization of human potentialities<sup>5</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> Dante Germino, *Henri Bergson: Activist Mysticism and the Open Society*, “The Political Science Reviewer” 9 (1979) no. 1, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> See Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 1–2, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971.

<sup>5</sup> Robert M. Hutchins, *Great Books: The Foundation of a Liberal Education*, New York 1954, p. 26-27.

Popper, in turn, describes the West as a civilization which aims “at humaneness and reasonableness, at equality and freedom”. In his opinion, the development of the West takes after the growth of an organism: Western civilization is still in its infancy and seeks to recover “from the shock of its birth – the transition from the tribal or *closed society*, with its submission to magical forces, to the *open society* which sets free the critical powers of man”<sup>6</sup>. In short, the purpose to which the West aspires is the open society.

Who can become a citizen of the open society? According to Popper, the open society consists of those who tend to resolve all their problems by discussing them and being convinced by rational arguments. Popper reasons in the following way: “*I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth. It is an attitude which does not lightly give up hope that [...] even where people demands and their interest clash, it is often possible to argue about the various demands and proposals, and to reach – perhaps by arbitration – a compromise which, because of its equality, is acceptable to most, if not to all. In short, rationalist attitude, or, as I may perhaps label it, the attitude of reasonableness is very similar to [...] the belief that in search for truth we need cooperation, and that, with help of argument, we can in time attain something like objectivity*”<sup>7</sup>.

Following Popper’s suggestion, we can ask a question about the effectiveness or achievements of the Western discussion today. Do we have any common standards in the West except debating? What common values have we succeeded to establish through public debate?

If we made a survey and asked people to enumerate the values currently shared by all the Westerners, would the list contain, for instance, an approval of heterosexual marriage, or a right of persons to life from conception to natural death, or a belief in the human capability of knowing the truth? We should doubt it, but rather expect the list to contain tolerance, freedom, or democracy, among which the latter

---

<sup>6</sup> Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. I, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 225.

one seems to dominate over the former two and be the most popular Western value today. For the efforts of the West to fight for democracy are remarkable all over the world, and no one can deny that democracy has significantly improved its position in recent decades. For instance, the sociological research done already in 1999 reported that “the number of authoritarian states had dropped from 101 to 43, partial democracies (with institutionalized voting rights) increased from 11 to 43, and full liberal democracies (with basic civil rights and freedoms) from 35 to 78”<sup>8</sup>.

Let us give back the floor to Popper. In Chapter 7 of *The Open Society*, he examines the well-known idea of Plato’s *Republic* that “the wise shall lead and rule, and the ignorant shall follow”, and, in the notes to this Chapter, he deals with three inner contradictions, namely the paradoxes of democracy, freedom, and tolerance. In reference to the corresponding fragments of *The Republic*, Popper gives the following definitions: “The so-called *paradox of freedom* is the argument that freedom [...] must lead to very great restraint, since it makes the bully free to enslave the meek. [...] *the paradox of tolerance* [is that] unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them. [...] *the paradox of democracy*, or more precisely, of majority-rule; [consists in] the possibility that the majority may decide that a tyrant should rule”<sup>9</sup>.

In Popper’s view, then, the most possible pitfalls to which the open society is exposed are all connected with these paradoxes. Now, what becomes obvious is that, in order to neutralize them, the West is in the constant need of being preoccupied with the quality of Western culture which finally comes down to the concern for liberal education.

---

<sup>8</sup> Ilkka Niiniluoto, *The Open Society and Its New Enemies. Critical Reflections on Democracy and Market Economy*, in *Preconditions of Democracy*, ed. G. Brennan, The Tampere Club Series 2, Tampere 2006, p. 172-173.

<sup>9</sup> Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. I, p. 265.

## Liberal Education and the Paradoxes

What is liberal education? It is the synonym of Western education, as it stems from the Western understanding of man. According to Western approach to man, each human being is a person determined by the potentiality and transcendence of his being.

The term “education” refers to human potentiality that characterizes human nature, embraces human dispositions, and requires their development. The development of human nature consists in acquiring virtues (good habits) that – as they are oriented towards truth, good, beauty, or sainthood – can be divided respectively into four sets: intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and religious. Since all mankind shares the same nature, education is needed by every man at every stage of his life.

The term “liberal”, in turn, refers to human transcendence that makes all human individuals distinguished from the realm of nature and that of society. The peculiarity of man in the realm of nature is made by human cognition, freedom (and responsibility), and love. The specificity of man in the realm of society is based on his subjectivity of law, sovereignty in existence, and religious dignity. All these manifestations of human transcendence do not tell what humans are to be, but what is to be provided for them to enable them living the human life properly<sup>10</sup>.

In other words, liberal education is aimed at the excellence of man as man, it treats man as an end, not as a means, and it watches the ends of life, and not the means to it<sup>11</sup>.

Is there any interest in liberal education in our times? It seems that these days there is a very limited interest in liberal education which is due to both external and internal doubts.

---

<sup>10</sup> See Paweł Tarasiewicz, *Osoba jako kryterium badawcze* [*Person as a Research Criterion*], “*Studia Elckie*” 11 (2009), p. 91-101.

<sup>11</sup> Robert M. Hutchins, *The Great Conversation*, in *The Great Conversation. A Reader's Guide to Great Books of the Western World*, Chicago 2006, p. 49.

External objections are raised by supporters of the experimental method. Their method has brought such remarkable achievements that it is now considered in some circles to be not only the sole method of acquiring scientific knowledge, but also the sole method of gaining any knowledge. Thus, we can often hear an opinion that questions, which are not answerable by experimental methods of science, are not answerable at all. Exceptions are only questions answered by mathematicians and logicians with their methods, while all other questions are subject to the methods of experimental science. If they cannot be provided by these methods with any answer, they are the questions which should never be asked in the first place. At best, they are the questions which we can answer by speculation or presumption; at worst, they are absurd and unreasonable questions. Really serious problems, on the other hand, draw their importance to a great extent from scientific observations, experiments, and measurements, by which they can receive their solutions; and solutions, when found by these methods, are regarded as better than products of guessing or intuition. They are grounded on facts, submitted to tests, and subject to further verification.

We can also hear an opinion that any answer we can obtain by the experimental method is never more than probable. We must accept the fact, therefore, that, outside of mathematics and logic, we cannot find any necessary and certain truth. If it is not a mathematical or logical formula, a statement may only look as if it was necessarily or certainly true, but it can really be neither necessary nor certain.

The statements about the existence of God or the immortality of the soul, for instance, are typical answers to questions unanswerable by the experimental method. In consequence, if it is to be the only method by which any knowledge is achievable, we should free ourselves from the illusion of having any valuable knowledge about God's existence or the soul's immortality. And, if we still wanted to accept the statements "God exists" and "the human soul is immortal", we would have to prepare to be regarded, from the perspective of the absolute rule of

experimental science in the field of knowledge, as hyper-religious or “hopelessly superstitious”<sup>12</sup>.

Liberal education can be seen as problematic even by those who admire it. It is so for, at least, four reasons. 1) Some admirers of liberal education claim that it is a poor form of education today, since it seems to be definitely outdated. It misses today’s real life and its problems. Many masters of liberal education, for instance, created their works in times of legal slavery, or those of prescience. It is dubious, then, that they have anything significant to convey to people of our democratic and scientific era.

This view is a kind of sociological determinism whose proponents claim that intellectual activity is always dependent on the dynamism of a particular society, and becomes irrelevant each time this society undergoes a significant change. Ideas which came into being in the past state of society cannot have any relevance for the present state of society. Their relevance, even if accepted, would always be illusive. For ideas are nothing but rationalizations of the social conditions existing in a given time. If we tried to use the ideas of the past in our time, we would deceive ourselves, because given ideas can have application exclusively to the time which produced them.

Sociological determinism, however, can be successfully denied by history and common sense. For even if society undergoes changes in time, man always remains himself. Regardless of time, he always tackles his problems and seeks to solve them. The problems of man vary from epoch to epoch in some regards, but they remain unvaried in others. There are timeless questions like: *What is the good life? What is a good state? Is there a God? What is the nature and destiny of man?* And all history shows that these persistent questions have not abandoned man at any moment of his presence on the earth. All history bears witness to the effort and contribution made by leading representatives of every epoch to the discussion on these persistent questions. Disdaining the light they offer us, only because they lived in some

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

remote time and place, could prove to be throwing out the baby with the bathwater. "As someone has cleverly remarked, *The Greeks could not broadcast the Aeschylean tragedy; but they could write it*"<sup>13</sup>.

2) Other admirers of liberal education hold that it is an inadequate form of education for the masses who take part in political activity through democracy, since, though they need education, they cannot be educated in liberal way. What the masses in particular need to be taught is reading newspapers and writing business letters; in this context, studying Plato or Aristotle must seem strange. If they needed to know anything about ancient philosophers, it could be translated for them in textbooks just to save them the time and effort of reading the whole books. Many democrats consider promoting liberal education to be antidemocratic. Their reasoning is that, since liberal education used to be put forward by and for aristocrats, and aristocrats are not democrats, then neither liberal education nor its promotors are democratic.

Liberal education, however, was aristocratic due to the fact that it was the education of those who enjoyed leisure and political power. And, since it was originally established as an education proper to those who had leisure and political power, is it not that liberal education is also the right education for everybody today, as we usually enjoy leisure time at least during weekends<sup>14</sup>?

3) There are also some admirers of liberal education who see the problem in giving liberal education to everybody, as it results in failing to give it to anybody. Since liberal education cannot be acquired by everybody, the attempt to give it to everybody will necessarily bring about the decline in quality of education for everybody. Instead of everybody, then, the few who are capable should be segregated from the many who are incapable, and seen to receive liberal education. The incapable of liberal education, in turn, should be relegated to other kinds of training that happen to interest them<sup>15</sup>.

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 51-52.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 65.



4) Some other admirers of liberal education think that, since the majority of mankind has never had the chance to receive a liberal education, it cannot be “proved” that they can receive it. Neither can it be “proved”, however, that they cannot<sup>16</sup>.

Can everybody really get this education? It seems that liberal education does not fit to everybody. For years university studies have been attended by a limited number of people. So also liberal education was limited to those who were able to afford studying. Moreover, exceptional intelligence and leisure were necessary to understand the content of the Western tradition, and only those who had political power were in real need to understand it. Now the situation is changed. All the citizens of democratic countries enjoy political power and leisure<sup>17</sup>.

Why is liberal education efficient? Liberal education is efficient, because it is based on liberal arts, and it is aimed at the discipline in those arts. While studying the liberal art, we learn to read, write, speak, listen, understand, and think. We learn to calculate, measure, and manipulate matter, quantity, and motion in order to predict, produce, and exchange. Living in the Western tradition consists in practicing the liberal arts, well or badly, all the time every day. As understanding the tradition as well as we can enables us to understand ourselves, so being as good liberal artists as we can enables us to become as fully human as we can.

The liberal arts are not only indispensable, but also unavoidable. We cannot decide for ourselves whether we are going to be human beings. The only question we face is whether we will be ignorant men, or rather those who seek to reach the highest point we are capable of attaining. The question, in short, is whether we will be poor liberal artists or good ones<sup>18</sup>.

Liberal education, then, seems to be an efficient way to resolve all the paradoxes of the open society, and develop all the achievements of the Western civilization including that of democracy.

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>18</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 49-50.

Popper also could become interested in liberal education, as it seems to resolve a specific problem which he finds in democracy. For, according to Popper, “democracy [...] provides the institutional framework for the reform of political institutions. It makes possible the reform of institutions without using violence, and thereby the use of reason in the designing of new institutions and the adjusting of old ones. It cannot provide reason. The question of the intellectual and moral standard of its citizens is to a large degree a personal problem. [...] Those who criticize democracy on any *moral* grounds fail to distinguish between personal and institutional problems. It rests with us to improve matters. The democratic institutions cannot improve themselves. The problem of improving them is always a problem for persons rather than for institutions”<sup>19</sup>.

It follows, then, that it is not enough to establish democratic institutions and procedures, for if there is no one who uses them as a democrat, there will remain the appearance of democracy or nothing of that.

To effectively avoid paradoxes of democracy, freedom and tolerance, we need to have liberally educated people involved in using democratic institutions and procedures. The paradoxes will haunt the West as long as the West experiments with democracy based solely on procedures, on a legal system, and not on liberal education. Although the proponents of democratic proceduralism strive to elaborate procedures as fair as possible to ensure all voters to be treated equally, and democracy to be the selection of what is thought best by the most voters<sup>20</sup>, but what they do poses the paradox of democracy rather than resolves it.

First, democratic proceduralism does not guarantee that the Western democracy will remain in the hands of the genuine Westerners whose civilization is based on and consists in developing dialogue. For this proceduralism can easily be used by the majority of voters

---

<sup>19</sup> Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. I, p. 126-127.

<sup>20</sup> See Gerry Mackie, *The Values of Democratic Proceduralism*, “Irish Political Studies” 26 (2011) no. 4, p. 439-453.

representing a not-genuinely-Western or non-Western civilization in order to subjugate minorities representing other civilizations. Second, democratic proceduralism does not guarantee that non-Westerners will use democracy in the Western way, that is, through the dialogue held in a specific way understood and adopted only by persons liberally educated. In consequence, the clash of civilizations cannot be avoided with the application of democratic proceduralism. This leads again to the conclusion that, since it cannot be decided by procedures, the case of clashing civilizations needs liberal education to be settled.

### **The West and non-Western Civilizations**

The relationships between the West and non-Western civilizations have been thoroughly explained by Samuel Huntington. Huntington's study helps to better understand the actual situation of the West, especially now in a time of global migration. The increasing number of immigrants, who transfer their non-Western civilizations to the West, seems to confirm his prophetic words: "In the politics of civilizations, the peoples and governments of non-Western civilizations no longer remain the objects of history as targets of Western colonialism but join the West as movers and shapers of history"<sup>21</sup>.

What does Huntington mean when he speaks of civilization? For him, "a civilization is a cultural entity. Villages, regions, ethnic groups, nationalities, religious groups, all have distinct cultures at different levels of cultural heterogeneity. The culture of a village in southern Italy may be different from that of a village in northern Italy, but both will share in a common Italian culture that distinguishes them from German villages. European communities, in turn, will share cultural features that distinguish them from Arab or Chinese communities. Arabs, Chinese and Westerners, however, are not part of any broader

---

<sup>21</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations?*, "Foreign Affairs" 72 (1993) no. 3, p. 23.

cultural entity. They constitute civilizations. A civilization is thus the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species”<sup>22</sup>.

Why is the clash of civilizations possible? One of the reasons concerns the world status of the West. In Huntington’s opinion, it is that “the growth of civilization-consciousness is enhanced by the dual role of the West. On the one hand, the West is at a peak of power. At the same time, however, and perhaps as a result, a return to the roots phenomenon is occurring among non-Western civilizations. Increasingly one hears references to [...] the *Asianization* in Japan, [...] *Hinduization* of India, [...] *re-Islamization* of the Middle East. [...] A West at the peak of its power confronts non-Wests that increasingly have the desire, the will and the resources to shape the world in non-Western ways”<sup>23</sup>.

Although it is not a place to analyze what the words “non-Western ways” exactly mean, but regarding the increasing number of citizens in Western countries who are descended from non-Western civilizations allows to imagine a not-too-distant future when it will become possible for non-Westerners to shape the Western world by the use of Western democracy in “non-Western way”. Procedural democracy being fostered by the West now seems to be an efficient means for de-Westernizing the West and its idea of the open society.

## Conclusion

Though what has been said about the clash of civilizations by Huntington cannot fill us with optimism, but it can give us food for

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 23-24. See also *ibid.*, p. 25: “Civilization identity will be increasingly important in the future, and the world will be shaped in large measure by the interactions among [...] eight major civilizations. These include Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and [...] African civilization”.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

thought, it can stimulate our thinking about the idea of the open society and the role of what is best in the West, that is, of liberal education, in developing it.

If liberal education is not a mistake, it fully deserves to be established in the open society; if the open society becomes a promotor of liberal education, it also deserves to survive. We, the Westerners, should strongly hope that liberal education will find its way to our schools before it is too late.

### References:

- Bergson Henri, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra, Cloudesley Brereton, W. Horsfall Carter, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977.
- Germino Dante, *Henri Bergson: Activist Mysticism and the Open Society*, "The Political Science Review" 9 (1979) no. 1, p. 1-37.
- Huntington Samuel P., *The Clash of Civilizations?*, "Foreign Affairs" 72 (1993) no. 3, p. 22-49.
- Hutchins Robert M., *Great Books: The Foundation of a Liberal Education*, New York 1954.
- Hutchins Robert M., *The Great Conversation*, in *The Great Conversation. A Reader's Guide to Great Books of the Western World*, Chicago 2006.
- Mackie Gerry, *The Values of Democratic Proceduralism*, "Irish Political Studies" 26 (2011) no. 4, p. 439-453.
- Niiniluoto Ilkka, *The Open Society and Its New Enemies. Critical Reflections on Democracy and Market Economy*, in *Preconditions of Democracy*, ed. G. Brennan, The Tampere Club Series 2, Tampere 2006, p. 171-186.
- Popper Karl R., *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 1-2, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971.
- Tarasiewicz Pawel, *Osoba jako kryterium badawcze [Person as a Research Criterion]*, "Studia Elckie" 11 (2009), p. 91-101.

## **The West: Between Open Society and Clashing Civilizations**

### Summary

The article aims to show that by its very nature Western civilization is well suited for making a significant contribution to build the open society based on intercivilizational dialogue. In the age of global migration, there is an obvious need for developing tools which would effectively transform the threat of a clash of civilizations into a creative dialogue between them. As a civilization of the dialogue, Western civilization seems to be an ideal instrument to meet that need. The article raises the following questions: Is there any connection between the idea of the open society and the heritage of Western civilization? Is liberal education an adequate means to resolve the paradoxes of the open society? Why is the West an arena for the clash of civilizations?

Key words: West, civilization, open society, dialogue, migration, clash of civilizations, liberal education.