Civilizational Dialogue and Orientalism:
or on the Diverging Agreement between
Edward Said and Louis Massignon

Fabio Petito
Department of International Relations
University of Sussex
F.Petito@sussex.ac.uk

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Abstract

In this paper I want to explore the relationship between the conceptual constellations of 'Dialogue of Civilizations' and 'Orientalism' (Said, 1979) in the context of the contemporary theoretical debate on dialogue and world order. I argue that the idea of civilizational dialogue by pointing to the necessity of a multicultural and peaceful world order entertains an ambiguous relationship with *Orientalism*: on one hand, it includes the main insight of Said's *Orientalism* by acknowledging the risk of an intellectual/political construction of the Self through the opposition to a negative-valued, dangerous or threatening Other; on the other, it contests both the conceptual impossibility of (or scepticism for) a genuine dialogue implied by the omnipresence-of-power theses suggested by Said's critical stance and the related unqualified rejection of any form of civilizational politics, even if within the framework of a dialogical mode. From a theoretical argument, the paper turns to Said's reading of Louis Massignon - the great French orientalist - as part of *Orientalism*. 'In diverging agreement' with Said, I argue that Massignon's work and life stand as a very concrete proof of the possibility of a 'dialogue of civilisations' that escapes the yoke of the *Orientalist* accusations. Furthermore, the life and intellectual contribution of Louis Massignon helps me to shed light, more than any abstract discussion, on the idea(l) of dialogue that should underpin any formulation of civilizational dialogue as an alternative model for world order.

The call for a 'dialogue of civilizations' has emerged in the '90s in the context of the debate on the future of world order, and in particular against the background of the two competing and powerful discourses of the 'clash of civilizations' and the 'end of history'.[1] This vision of 'dialogue of civilizations' has been articulated a set of ideas, often generic but increasingly

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[1] For the two most well-know academic articulations of these discourses see respectively, Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilisations?", *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (1993): 22-49 and *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1996); Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History", *The National Interest*, 16 (1989): 3-16 and *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

perceived as a political necessity all over the world to somehow contribute to a more peaceful and just world order. Since 9/11 dialogue of civilizations - and its related components of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue - has been the subject of a proliferation of public initiatives and international meetings, even if it has overall received scant attention by international relations and political theorists in clarifying its potentiality as a contribution to an alternative framework for the future world order.[2]

Conversely this political discourse has been increasingly the object of public scepticism and criticism focussing on the use of the concept of civilisation but also - more importantly for this paper - on that of dialogue. In my reading these criticisms are based, at times implicitly, on two theoretical arguments: the first would contend that the concept of civilization belongs to old-fashioned geopolitical arguments usually embedded in culturalist-orientalist and, sometime, racist frames and has, therefore, to be regarded as simplistic, theoretically flawed, and, more critically, politically dangerous;[3] the second criticism would go that a genuine dialogue might well be normatively worthwhile but it is either philosophically impossible because of the omnipresence of power or it remains an unrealistic utopia (or worse, a rhetorical *escamotage* in the hands of dangerous illiberal politicians) when it is brought into the realm of concrete real-world politics where the issues of power and interest are sovereign. In their most challenging articulations, both arguments bring to the fore what I would contend is the ambiguous relations between the conceptual constellations of 'Dialogue of Civilizations' and 'Orientalism' as masterfully discussed by Edward Said (1979). I will argue that the idea of civilizational dialogue, on one hand, by pointing to the necessity of a multicultural and peaceful world order includes the main insight of Said's *Orientalism* by acknowledging the risk of an intellectual/political construction of the Self through the opposition to a negative-valued, dangerous or threatening Other; on the other, it contests both the conceptual impossibility of (or scepticism for) a genuine dialogue implied by the omnipresence-of-power theses suggested by Said's critical/foucouldian stance and the related unqualified rejection of any form of civilizational politics, even if within the framework of a dialogical mode.

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[2] Examples of the initiatives and forums focussing on the issue of dialogue of civilisations, cultures and religions, some the result of government intervention, others linked to international organisations or NGOs, while others primarily of religious inspiration., are: under the banner of the UN, the recent initiative for an Alliance of Civilizations, co-sponsored by Spain and Turkey and launched in 2005, see <http://unaoc.org/>; the UNESCO actions for the dialogue of civilizations, <http://www.unesco.org/dialogue2001>; the ISESCO (The Islamic Organization for Education, Science and Culture) programmes on dialogue of civilisations, <www.isesco.org.ma>; the World Public Forum "Dialogue of Civilizations" (a Russian-led initiative), <http://www.dialogueofcivilizations.org>; the Sant'Egidio community International Meetings 'Peoples and Religions', <http://www.santegidio.org/en/ecumenismo/uer/index.htm>; and the Malaysian-based International Movement for a Just World (JUST), see <www.just-international.org/>. For my attempt to discuss 'dialogue of civilizations' in the context of IR, see Fabio Petito (2007) 'The Global Political Discourse of Dialogue among Civilizations: Mohammad Khatami and Vaclav Havel' *Global Change, Peace & Security* 19 (2): 103-25 and "Dialogue of Civilizations as an alternative Model of World Order" in F. Petito and M Michalis, eds., *Civilizational Dialogue and World Order: The Other Politics of Cultures, Religions and Civilizations in International Relations* (Palgrave: 2009), 47-67.

[3] In the context of this paper for reasons of space I will only be able to briefly touch upon the complex theoretical issue of the scholarly status of the category of civilizations but I will refer indirectly to this important dimension of the Orientalism's critique in the last part of the paper when discussing what I call the Said-Massignon 'diverging agreement'. For my qualified defence of the use of civilizations in IR see, Fabio Petito 'The contemporary ambiguities of religions as a source of civilizational identity in International Relations', paper presented at the ISA Annual Convention, New Orleans, 17-20 February 2010.

This paper will therefore put forward an intellectual defence of the political discourse of dialogue of civilizations by challenging these two theoretical and critical arguments. In the first part of this paper I will present a critical reconstruction of the theoretical debate that has emerged around the concept of dialogue in contemporary International Political Theory; in this context I will argue that a hermeneutical understanding of dialogue is better fit to theoretically frame the idea of 'dialogue of civilizations'. The second part of the paper will focus on the ambiguous relationship between the conceptual constellations of 'Dialogue of Civilizations' and 'Orientalism'; finally the paper will briefly turn to Said's reading of Louis Massignon - the great French orientalist - as part of *Orientalism.* 'In diverging agreement' with Said, I argue that Massignon's work and life stand as a very concrete proof of the possibility of a 'dialogue of civilisations' that escapes the yoke of the *Orientalist* accusations. Furthermore, the life and intellectual contribution of Louis Massignon helps me to shed light, more than any theoretical discussion, on the idea(l) of dialogue that should underpin any formulation of dialogue of civilizations as a contribution to a multicultural and peaceful world order.

Dialogue and International Political Theory

Some time ago Steven Lukes challenged my philosophical enthusiasm for the notion of 'dialogue' by comparing its increasing vogue in some philosophical circles with that of 'dialectic' in the 60s and 70s: At that time almost everything was 'dialectical' and, in a similar way, he was implying, we have to be careful today not to turn everything into being 'dialogical'.[4] His remarks were correctly pointing — though I believe in a hyperbolical way — to a recent emergence of dialogue as a central matter of reflection in Philosophy and Political Theory.[5] Richard Shapcott in his *Justice, Community and Dialogue in International Relations* has provided an in-depth and comprehensive account of this recent intellectual history at the intersection of Philosophy, Political Theory and International Relations Theory and, by arguing for a 'thin' cosmopolitanism inspired by Gadamerian hermeneutics, has provided a possible philosophical foundation for my argument on dialogue of civilisations.[6] As he tellingly asserts in the introduction of his book, what is at stake today is "the question of justice in a culturally diverse world: […] is it possible to conceive of a universal or cosmopolitan community in which justice to difference is achieved?"[7]

Dialogue and the Communitarian/Cosmopolitan Debate

This question has increasingly become to be seen as a kind of extension to 'the international' of the *problématique* raised by John Rawls' publication in 1971 of *A Theory of Justice* and

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[4] Steven Lukes, reply to my presentation "Human Solidarity: Western Hegemony or Cross-cultural Encounter?", in the graduate workshop on 'The Implication of Moral Diversity', London School of Economics, May 2002. For Steven Lukes' own statement on this issue see, *Liberals and Cannibals: The Implications of Diversity* (New York: Verso, 2003).

[5] The classical hermeneutical approach to dialogue is, of course, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, but see also Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* and "The Politics of Recognition", in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25-73. For a different conceptualisation of dialogue as communicative action inspired by the regulative ideal of an 'ideal speech situations', see Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas MaCarthy, 2 vols. (Boston: Bacon Press, 1984).

[6] Richard Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue in International Relations* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001). See also Fred Dallmayr, "A Gadamerian Perspective on Civilisational Dialogue", *Global Dialogue* 3, no. 1 (2001): 64-75, reprinted in Dallmayr, *Dialogue among Civilisations: Some Exemplary Voices* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), ch. 1.

[7] Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue in International Relations*, 1.

the Communitarian/Liberal debate that unfolded as result.[8] Evidence of this reading are many: first, Rawls himself had more recently elaborated *The Law of Peoples* to extend the idea of a social contract — based on the idea of justice as fairness — to the society of peoples;[9] secondly, before of *The Law of Peoples*, Charles Beitz and Thomas Pogge had already tried to extend the idea of justice as fairness to the international arena by formulating what are now often referred to as Rawlsian approaches to international distributive justice;[10] and finally the same movement can be identified in the intellectual path of two of Rawls' leading communitarian opponents, Michael Walzer, who moved from an alternative conceptualization of justice in *Sphere of Justice* to 'the international' by attempting the elaboration of a minimal morality for international relations in his *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*, and Amitai Etzioni, founder of the Communitarian Network, who has recently attempted to formulate a new communitarian theory of international relations.[11]

Together with this literature of political theory dealing with 'the international', there has been the emergence, following what Steve Smith has described as 'the forty years detour' and in particular the end of the Cold War, of a growing literature within the discipline of International Relations focusing on the same set of issues to the point that it had become something of a cliché in the 1990s to talk about of a return to normative theory in International Relations.[12] Much of this literature accepted the communitarian/cosmopolitan divide as the necessary and appropriate framework for normative reflections in International Relations although some more radical post-structuralist inspired interventions rejected it on the grounds of its implicit restriction of the debate.[13] The story of this extremely interesting and variegated body of IR literature has been well and effectively narrated both by Cochran and Shapcott in the two previously cited books and I do not have anything to add in this

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[8] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised ed. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999). See also by the same author *Political Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) and "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited" in *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). For an account of the communitarian/liberal debate see Mulhall and Swift, eds., *Liberals and Communitarians* and Shlomo Avineri and Avner de-Shalit, eds., *Communitarianism and Individualism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[9] Rawls, *The Law of Peoples– with "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited"*.

[10] Charles Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) and Thomas Pogge, *Realizing Rawls* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). For a discussion of the 'Rawlsian approaches to international distributive justice' under the rubric of 'cosmopolitanism' see Molly Cochran, *Normative Theory in International Relations: A Pragmatic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), ch. 1. It has to be noted, and this can also be argued in the aftermath of the publication of *The Law of People*, that many have stressed the un-rawlsian nature of these contributions, which tend to articulate a stronger version of cosmopolitanism then the one to which Rawls would be ready to subscribe. On this matter, see the two review essays by Chris Brown, "John Rawls, 'The Law of Peoples', and International Political Theory", *Ethics and International Affairs* 14 (2000): 125-32 and "Theories of International Justice", *British Journal of Political Science* 27 (1997): 273-97. For an argument that locates these developments within the growing field of International Political Theory see also Nicholas Rengger, "Reading Charles Beitz: Twenty-five Years of Political Theory and International Relations*", Review of International Studies* 31, no. 2 (2005): 361-69.

[11] Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983) and *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994). For a discussion of Walzer's contribution to the cosmopolitan/communitarian debate, see Cochran*, Normative Theory in International Relations*, ch. 2. Amitai Etzioni, *From Empire to Community: A New Approach to International Relations* (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

[12] Steve Smith, "The Forty Years Detour", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 21, no. 2, 489-506.

[13] For the cosmopolitan/communitarian divide as the defining feature for IR normative theory see Brown, *International Relations Theory*: *New Normative Approaches*. For a critical presentation of the poststructuralist challenge to International Relations theory see Jenny Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations: Bringing the Political Back* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999).

respect.[14] What is important to this paper, however, is to explain why and how against the background of these theoretical discussions the notion of dialogue has been gradually emerging as central matter of reflection.

To this question Shapcott has provided a very detailed and persuasively argued answer by showing how against the stalemate of the communitarian/cosmopolitan divide the idea of communication opened up the way for what he calls a 'communitarian path to cosmopolitanism'. I would now like to turn to a critical account of this argument. I think the first key philosophical shift for understanding Shapcott's thesis is the rephrasing of the philosophical *problématique* of the communitarian/cosmopolitan divide as a question of universal justice versus justice as recognition of difference. This articulation was made possible by the debate on multiculturalism and has drawn in particular on Charles Taylor's argument for a politics of recognition.[15] The injustice brought about by the lack of recognition of a 'thick' difference and otherness moves attention to the ontological level of identity. Facing this different formulation of the problem, Shapcott maintains, following Todorov's classic discussion of the self/other relations in *The Conquest of America*, that recognition is most successfully accomplished through acts of communication - the point here being that "an account of justice as communication remains universalist in aspiration, while at the same time remaining attentive to particularity".[16]

From this viewpoint Shapcott examines all the recent trends in International Political Theory that have given space to the notion of communication and reaches the conclusion that Andrew Linklater's formulation of a cosmopolitanism inspired by Habermasian discourse ethics provides "the most detailed and systematic account of what a discursively based community concerned to do justice to difference might consist of".[17] In other words, according to Shapcott "the principal achievement of Linklater's critical theory has been to introduce a model of conversation between participants inhabiting potentially radically different contexts but who are nonetheless conceived of as equal".[18] It is from here, by acknowledging the achievements and criticising the limits of Linklater's cosmopolitanism, that Shapcott puts forward "a model of dialogue informed by philosophical hermeneutics […] which entails a 'thinner' and thereby more inclusive vision of cosmopolitan community".[19]

To explain the essential distinction from Linklater, Shapcott has to compare the dialogical model proposed by Habermas with the one articulated by Gadamer. Here one of the main – and I would say essential – criticisms brought against Habermas relates to his position that "moral conversation regarding universal principle can only be conducted between post-conventional agents guided by the unforced force of the better argument".[20] In other words, the post-conventional consciousness that according to Habermas is required to enter the discursive engagement implies "the recognition that moral codes are malleable social products rather than immutable conventions to which they must submit".[21] To put it simply,

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[14] Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue in International Relations* and Cochran, *Normative Theory in International Relations*.

[15] Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", in *Multiculturalism*.

[16] Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue*, 51. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harper, 1984 [1982])

[17] Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue*, 94. For Linklater's dialogical cosmopolitanism modelled on Habermas' discourse ethics, see *The Transformation of the Political Community: Ethical Foundations in a Post-Westphalian Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

[18] Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue*, 94

[19] Ibid.,, 131.

[20] Ibid. 116.

[21] Linklater quoted in Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue*, 119.

the identity of the agents engaged in the creation of this discursive cosmopolitan community must have to be freed from the 'dark shadow' of pre-modern 'traditions and superstitions'. As result, arguably the majority of world's population is de facto excluded from what was supposed to be a political model based on the principle of inclusion.

It is here interesting to note Shapcott's double critical movements: on one side, he points to the fact that Habermas' model explicitly privileges questions of 'right' over questions of the 'good' and, as a consequence, reproduces the same private/public split and proceduralist emphasis of Rawls' notion of public reason; on the other, a similar accusation is also made against poststructuralist IR theories which share, in Shapcott's view, "a commitment to 'theorising in a register of freedom [defined as] the Enlightenment ethos of critique".[22]

But what perhaps is even more important in order to understand the philosophical nature of a hermeneutic conversation is a second key difference outlined by Shapcott, that is, the *telos* of conversation. While the telos of a dialogical engagement from the perspective of critical theory is a rational consensus reached through 'the unforced force of the better argument', a hermeneutical dialogue has as its ultimate purpose *understanding*. In other words, while in the first case we are confronted with a conversation that looks more like a debate where some sort of rational conclusion has to be reached, in the second case we are in the presence of a dialogical encounter whose aim is to understand the other's point of view in the form of having been able to 'stand in the other's shoes'.[23] Through this image, we can start seeing how the hermeneutical conversation involves the integrity of the ontological difference of the participants and can only take place as a lived existential experience. For example along similar lines Fred Dallmayr — who has articulated a model for intercivilisational dialogue inspired by Gadamer's hermeneutics — has suggested that the experience of interpersonal friendship can indicate what a genuine global conversation might look like.[24]

'Standing in the other's shoes' is not the result of a moral humanistic stance but a necessary 'intellectual' condition since "according to Gadamer, all interpretation and understanding occur within the tradition or horizon of consciousness constituted by the linguistic and historical tradition of the interpreter",[25] and therefore there is neither a neutral language nor a tradition-independent rationality which can govern the conversation. But for philosophical hermeneutics — and in this resides its universalist tension —"linguistic/historic traditions are not 'grids' or cages that are inflexible and closed [but they] are open, changing, and contain in Taylor's words 'doors to otherness'".[26] It is the idea of 'the fusion of horizons', in fact, that captures the dialogic model of understanding put forward by Gadamer and provides a possible philosophical articulation of what a dialogue of civilisations might look like.[27] I want now to turn to a more in-depth discussion of this Gadamerian model of dialogue, as interpreted and applied to international relations by Shapcott.

Dialogue as 'Fusion of Horizons': A Gadamerian Approach

The idea of 'fusion of horizons' has been criticised for reproducing a kind of all-too-easy and unproblematic 'dialectical synthesis' between different traditions which are engaging

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[22] Ibid., 129.
[23] Ibid., 171.
[24] See Dallmayr, "A Gadamerian Perspective" and "Conversation across Boundaries: E Pluribus Unum?" in *Dialogue of Civilisations*, 31-47.
[25] Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue*, 136.
[26] Ibid., 142.
[27] See Ibid., 142-52.

dialogically.[28] Following Dallmayr, Shapcott argues that this criticism is flawed and elucidates that the Gadamerian 'fusion of horizons' metaphor is nothing but the description of the structure of the process of understanding itself. In other words, each time understanding takes place - between individuals as well as between a reader and a text - this is in the form of a 'fusion of horizons':

> Understanding involves a fusion in the sense that it does not involve either the annihilation or assimilation of existing positions but rather their coming to inhabit a shared perspective. This shared meaning is, in an important sense, something new that exceeds and transforms the previous horizons without destroying them… The fusion, therefore, occurs when both horizons remain and yet simultaneously came to share a new meaning, or simultaneously to occupy the same territory or vantage point[29]

In this lies the essence of the process of understanding and, as a consequence, its transformative nature as human experience. If genuine understanding is achieved the participants have to come to see things from a new perspective and to this extent a change in the horizons and traditions that they inhabit - constitutive of their identities - must have taken place. In Gadamer's words: "Discussion bears fruit when a common language is found. Then the participants part from one another as changed beings. The individual perspectives with which they entered upon the discussion have been transformed, and so they are transformed themselves"[30]

It is important to stress that if "understanding requires that we 'transpose' or 'place' ourselves into the horizon of the other, the real condition of possibility for understanding is our situatedness and belonging *and* [of course] a willingness to its disturbance".[31] In other words, it is in the lack of any shared language - apart from the essential and ontological shared linguisticality that defines our being-in-the-world as humans[32] - at the very heart of our communitarian differences, in the acknowledgment of the deep otherness of the Other, that understanding has its condition of possibility. So it is this articulation of dialogue and understanding as 'fusion of horizons' that opens up the possibility for a communitarian path to a cosmopolitanism that Shapcott defines as a 'thin cosmopolitanism', whose aim "is to enable a genuine conversation between cultures" and at the same time to "leave[s] open the possibility that thicker cosmopolitan communities may develop".[33] In other words Shapcott explains that:

> The moment of equality in conversation occurs not because understanding of the other is achieved, but rather because in conversation both self and other are seen equally as potential revealers or communicators of an experience of truth. At the same time the other is seen as different, because unknown, and what they have to say has not been revealed. To recognise their equality and their difference,

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[28] For a discussion of this criticism see Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue*, 147 and Fred Dallmayr, *Beyond Orientalism: Essays on Cross-Cultural Encounter* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), esp. ch. 2 entitled "Gadamer, Derrida, and the Hermeneutic of Difference", 39-62.

[29] Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue*, 143.

[30] Gadamer quoted in Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue,* 144.

[31] Ibid., 144-5.

[32] Here the classical locus is Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996). In his late works, Heidegger became growingly concerned with the issue of cross-cultural understanding in a globalised word driven by Western 'technology'. See for example Heidegger's collaboration with a Chinese scholar Paul Shih-yi Hsiao in the translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, Paul Shih-yi Hsiao, "Heidegger and our translation of the Tao Te Ching", in *Heidegger and Asian Thought,* ed. Graham Parkes (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 93–103.

[33] Ibid., 209.

one must be ready to learn from what they may have to say… In other words *one must be open to what one might learn in communication.* [34]

The learning dimension, it seems to me, is the other essential element of the definition of a genuine (hermeneutical) dialogue. If one of the participants to a conversation is under the assumption of possessing the whole truth or not in need of learning anything from the other, then the dialogue is doomed to be sterile and in a significant way meaningless. Paradoxically, and this is one of the most contested aspect of philosophical hermeneutics, in order to give proper centrality to the idea of reciprocal learning, the concept of truth has to be clearly brought into the picture, for what is ultimately asked from conversation is to see the truth in what the other has to say. It is for this reason, Shapcott contends, that Gadamer has pointed to the Socratic dialogue as the model for a hermeneutic conversation:

The Socratic dialogue is not a contest between opinions (or *doxa*) which are removed from the search for truth…the question is not 'rhetorical' or 'pedagogical' in which the answer is already known, but actually open to the possibility of a new answer …it presupposes a degree of good will on the part of the participants…The attitude of openness to the truth stems from admission of one's own fallibility and ignorance… [the] recognition of human finitude.[35]

It is beyond the purpose of this study to discuss and defend the notion of 'truth' articulated by Gadamer. Here it is enough to stress how this articulation emerges in the context of Gadamer's argument against the scientific method as the only appropriate way to knowledge as well as from his belief that the experience of truth in the non-scientific realm resembles that of the aesthetic experience. This is why for Gadamer "to encounter truth is to have an experience. An experience is in this sense a life-changing encounter; it involves both a dislocation from previous thoughts and an integration of new insights".[36] The 'personal/existential' dimension of this realization is even more clearly stated by Gadamer when he argues that "understanding always involves something like the application of the past (or a text)…to the present situation of the interpreter".[37] In other words, as Shapcott convincingly comments:

We can only understand the past (or a text) in so far as *it says something to us*, in so far as it has meaning and applicability to ourselves in our situation. 'Genuine' understanding occurs when we have transposed ourselves into the other's situation, heard the other's voice and understood its applicability to ourselves[38]

Understanding can only happen as a subjective individual experience where the universal glimpse of truth is revealed. Of course, truth is never fully achieved and comprehended and it is in its being a continuous search that the possibility and meaning of genuine dialogue lies.

In order to better grasp the political manifestation of a hermeneutical dialogue, the role the concepts of *phronesis* and solidarity play in Gadamer's thought needs to be discussed.[39] For Gadamer, *phronesis*, usually translated as wisdom or practical rationality, is the appropriate mode for, as well as the best illustration of, dialogical reasoning. *Phronesis* is a form of

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[34] Ibid., 148, emphasis added.
[35] Ibid., 151.
[36] Gadamer quoted in Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue*, 149.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue*, 149.
[39] Here I have followed with some variations and differences the discussion by Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue*, 152-61.

contextualised practice with a double meaning: first, in the sense that there is not a universal rationality as such (apart perhaps from some general principles of logic) but each form of *practical* rationality is, to use MacIntyre's formulation, tradition-dependent, that is embedded in a social tradition as the set of practices of a particular community; secondly, even within a particular tradition, the application of practical rationality, arguably the key faculty in political decision-making, is always context-specific in the sense of always requiring the exercise of judgment with reference to a particular concrete situation.[40]

In other words, an abstract rational formula for political consensus - (mechanically) emerging from the application of the liberal idea of public reason (as the veil of ignorance) or the critical theory notion of communicative rationality (as the unforced force of the better argument in an ideal speech situation)[41]- is not available to philosophical hermeneutics, which cannot reason except with reference to a specific concrete political situation. This point is further confirmed by the constant reference Gadamer makes to the *sache* - the subject matter of a conservation - as the centre that guides and conducts a dialogue, which is always about the understanding of a specific subject matter: in a sense the very opposite of discourse ethics which confines the conversation only to principles that can be universalised.[42]

But if, on one side, the appropriate mode of dialogical reasoning is described by *phronesis*, this Socratic wisdom and practical rationality that require contextualised judgement and discernment, on the other, *phronesis* requires solidarity in the sense that it can only work properly within the context of a specific bond of belonging. 'Understanding', *qua* that existential experience discussed above also, however, creates and enlarges solidarity (and here hermeneutics transcends the passive communitarian stance). In other words, as Shapcott puts it, "the exercise of practical reasoning both relies on pre-existing solidarities or horizons and enables the creation of new ones" and "because philosophical hermeneutics is universalistic in its claim, this means that it is concerned with the creation of universal solidarity as the necessary conditions for the exercise of practical reasoning on a global scale".[43]

In this sense, I think Shapcott is correct in arguing that "in its ultimate form then Gadamer sees the task of hermeneutics as contributing to 'the rediscovery of solidarities that could enter into the future society of humanity'".[44] Or more precisely,

> Philosophical hermeneutics attempts to direct attention to existing solidarities and to awaken the possibility of new solidarities in which understanding and practical reasoning can operate: the task of hermeneutic practice is the pursuit of 'new normative and common solidarities that let practical reason speak again'.[45]

It now should have become clear why the global political discourse of dialogue of civilisations seems to me to endorse Gadamer's hopes by embarking on that way in search of 'new global solidarities'. Resembling very closely the words of the supporters of a dialogue of civilizations, Gadamer has - rhetorically in this case - asked:

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[40] In the context of this discussion it is interesting to recall MacIntyre's argument that each notion of justice is deeply linked with and dependent on a concept of practical rationality, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988).

[41] Here the references are clearly to Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* and Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

[42] Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue*, 140-1.

[43] Ibid., 159.

[44] Gadamer quoted in Ibid., fn. 89, 160.

[45] Ibid., 160, the internal quotation is by Gadamer.

> Whether in foreign civilisations that are now been drawn technologically over into the ambit of the Euro-American civilisations—China, Japan, and especially India—much of the religious and social traditions of their Ancient cultures does not still live on under the cover of European furnishing and American jobs, and whether whatever lives on may not perhaps bring about an awareness out of necessity once again of new normative and common solidarities that let practical reason speak again[46]

As this quote suggests, Gadamer's reflection had already perceived many of the reasons for - and features of - the emerging political discourse of dialogue of civilisations. The philosophically rich approach to dialogue he articulates provides an ideal starting point to shed some further light on several aspects of this global political discourse as well as to deepen the contribution that the theoretical articulation of dialogue among civilisations can make to an argument for the normative structure of contemporary international society. It is to this task that the next section of this paper is partially devoted.

The Need for an Active Politics of Dialogue

As I mentioned, dialogue of civilisations as global political discourse emerged against the background of the two predominant discourses of post-Cold War international relations, namely, 'the end of history/globalisation of liberalism' and 'the clash of civilisations'. At the same time, I would argue that its theoretical articulation could not be set up as a *via media* theoretical position between them. By that I mean that dialogue of civilisations is not simply a middle way between a fully fledged 'thick' cosmopolitanism and a minimal 'thin' communitarian-based international ethics of coexistence, rather it is first and foremost a radical call for the re-discussion and renegotiation of the core Western-centric and liberal assumptions upon which the normative structure of contemporary international society is today based. In other words, it is not a matter of *intellectually* mediating between a 'thin' or 'thick' - but essentially Western-centric and mainly liberal - international society but of *practically* entering into this inter-civilisational dialogical encounter so as to create, in Gademer's words, these 'new normative and common solidarities that let practical reason speak again' in a way that is appropriate to the new global predicament.[47]

In this respect, Shapcott's hermeneutic-inspired thin cosmopolitanism (isn't his 'thin cosmpolitanism' already etymologically a kind of mediation between the 'thick' and 'thin' mentioned above?) while re-imagining cosmopolitanism "as a vehicle for intercultural conversation" never really goes to give real life to this cross-cultural dialogue.[48] And as a consequence, his argument remains, I would contend, unavoidably trapped in the political logic of Western-centric and liberal contemporary international society: this is perhaps most clearly the case in the last chapter of his book when Shapcott tries to show what this dialogue might concretely look like in international relations and ends up *de facto* not being able of going beyond Linklater's critique of sovereignty and his cosmopolitan model of a post-Westphalian community;[49] the same problem can be identified in his exemplification of dialogue with reference to the issue of human rights for the discussion never engages with

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[46] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1981), 87 quoted in Schapcott, 160.
[47] See fn. 74.
[48] Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue*, 209.
[49] Ibid., 219-24. See Linklater, *The Transformation of the Political Community*.

what other really-existing cultural or religious traditions might have to say and concretely offer in terms of content on this topic.[50]

In other words, this approach shows, on one hand, a great deal of appropriate and useful theoretical discussion *on* dialogue, but, on the other, very little dialogue *in action*. This is actually recognised by Shapcott himself who in the introduction warns the reader that "the concepts explored here are incomplete as long as they remain exclusively in the abstract realm" and that "therefore this book should be seen as merely the first step along the way of developing a thin cosmopolitanism informed by philosophical hermeneutics".[51] Having said that, however, we are left with the impression that this void is not only the result of an incomplete exploration but also of an implicit scepticism that non-western cultures and their non-liberal forms of politics might actively contribute to a more just global community. This explains, in my view, Shapcott's inclination to emphasise a kind of post-modern commitment and respect for radical differences as local truths and why *inter alia* he takes contention with Charles Taylor's notion of 'presumption of worth', that is, the idea that every long-lived culture has, to use the above-quoted Gadamer's words, something distinctive to offer for the solidarity and welfare of humanity, by arguing that "local truth may remain just that, local, and have no obvious universal applicability, truth or contribution".[52]

To put it differently, Shapcott is philosophically committed to a hermeneutical dialogue as much as he remains politically committed to a politics of emancipation in the tradition of the Enlightenment. As a result, he is necessarily less optimistic about what I would call 'a politics of dialogue of civilisations', which is in my view urgently needed today. In some sense he cannot be blamed for that: not only because everybody speaks from 'somewhere' but also, and I would contend more importantly, because the 'progressive' content of a politics of dialogue of civilisations, as dialogical fusion also of non-western cultures and their non-liberal forms of politics, is really what has to be more persuasively and extensively explored and where, in my view, lies the key for the construction of a more peaceful and just world order through dialogue of civilisations.[53]

But if this scepticism may well be intellectually understandable, when the present situation of international politics is brought into the picture it becomes politically unacceptable, for in the words of Dallmayr: "I definitely do not wish to give aid and comfort to a homogenising globalism or universalism, which often is only a smokescreen for neo-colonial forms of domination".[54] In other words, what pushes me beyond the thin cosmopolitanism *à la* Shapcott towards a politics of dialogue of civilisations (though still to be articulated and yet to come) is a belief that this search for a new global ethos, that is unity in diversity, is today a moral and political obligation for, in the words of Gadamer, "the hegemony or

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[50] Ibid., 224-32. For a cross-cultural understanding and construction of human rights, there exists a burgeoning literature, see Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim, ed., *Human Rights in Cross-Cultural Perspectives: A Quest for Consensus* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), David A. Bell, *East Meets West: Human Rights and Democracy in East Asia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), Bhikhu Parekh, "Non-Ethnocentric Universalism", in *Human Rights in Global Politics*, eds. Tim Dunne and Nicholas J. Wheeler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 128-59 and Charles Taylor, "Conditions for an Unforced Consensus on Human Rights", in *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*, eds. J. Bauer and A.D. Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 125-44.

[51] Ibid., 5.

[52] Ibid., 224. For the notion of 'presumption of worth', see Taylor, The Politics of Recognition", in *Multiculturalism*, 66.

[53] For an initial interesting attempt in this direction, see Richard Falk, "A Worldwide Religious Resurgence in an Era of Globalization and Apocalyptic Terrorism", in *Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile*, eds. Fabio Petito and Pavlos Hatzopoulos (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 181-208.

[54] Dallmayr, *Beyond Orientalism*, xi.

unchallengeable power of any one single nation - as we now have with just one superpower - is dangerous for humanity. It would go against human freedom".[55] In a more structural way, Dallmayr has provocatively argued for a comparison between the age of discovery (1492) and our era of globalisation on the grounds that we are again in the midst of an age of western outreach and exploration, animated by a sense of mission backed-up by military and economic power: in few words, an extremely powerful and omnipresent structure of hegemony.[56] In my view, any discussion of contemporary world politics cannot lose sight of this in many ways historically unprecedented political dimension.

Not only that: what reinforces the need for an active politics of dialogue of civilisations is also the perception of something like a fundamental crisis of ethics and politics in the emancipated and liberal Western world. This dimension is for example largely present and argumentatively essential in many of the visions of Western and non-Western supporters of dialogue of civilisations often in the form, for example, of a critique of the Western over-reliance on rationality and its fascination with materialism. To this critical situation, dialogue of civilisations seems to bring the promise of an answer, or better, a way, a path on which to start walking in search for an answer.

Having said that, however, I have been perhaps too critical of Shapcott's global dialogue whose 'politics of (mutual) understanding' maintains a great value in our post 9/11 era where misunderstandings, misperceptions and reciprocal ignorance are increasingly seen as the key weapons used by the political supporters and 'entrepreneurs' of the 'clash of civilisations' for, as Edward Said has persuasively argued, what we are facing is first of all the dangers of a 'clash of ignorance'.[57] With this context in mind, a politics of understanding would be already a great achievement. But to really face this challenge at its roots we need to imagine a way out of this strict grid of choices imposed by the contemporary Western-centric and liberal global order towards the construction of a multicultural peaceful international society. For this, a politics of dialogue of civilisations need to be expounded and supported

The Political Discourse of Dialogue of Civilizations

If the political discourse of dialogue of civilizations calls for the reopening and re-discussion of the core Western-centric and liberal assumptions upon which the normative structure of the contemporary international society is based, it is fair to say that it represents a powerful normative challenge to the contemporary political orthodoxy implicit in all the major political discourses on the future of world order. In fact, as Amitai Etzioni has convincingly argued:

> both the end-of-history and the clash-of–civilizations arguments approach the non-Western parts of the world as if they have little, if anything, to offer to the conception of a good society – at least to its political and economic design – or to the evolving new global architecture.[58]

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[55] Thomas Pantham, "Some Dimensions of Universality of Philosophical Hermeneutics: A Conversation with Hans–Georg Gadamer", *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 9 (1992): 132.

[56] Fred Dallmayr, "Modes of Cross-cultural Encounter: Reflections on 1492", in *Beyond Orientalism*, 1-37. See also Dallmayr's Introduction in *Alternative Visions: Paths in the Global Village* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998).

[57] Edward W. Said, "The Clash of Ignorance", *The Nation*, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20011022/said>, posted on October 4 2001,   accessed on 15/9/2010.

[58] Amitai Etzioni (2004) *From Empire to Community: A New Approach to International Relations* (New York: Palgrave), p. 26.

Within this horizon, I would contend that three major theoretical and political lines of arguments emerge as prerequisites to any normative structure of contemporary international society that wishes to be sensitive to the call for a dialogue of civilizations.[59]

Firstly, if the normative structure of future global coexistence is to be genuinely universal, then it cannot only be liberal and Western-centric. Genuine universality requires a sharp awareness of the presence of different cultures and civilizations in world affairs; in many ways it must also spring from there. A fundamental void looms when this normative structure reflects the tenets of cosmopolitan liberalism, a political tradition that excludes the centrality of cultural and religious identity in the everyday practices of 'really existing communities'.[60]

Secondly, any reflection on a principled world order based on dialogue of civilizations must acknowledge something like a fundamental ethical and political crisis linked to the present liberal Western civilization and its expansion and recognise that dialogue civilizations seems to enshrine the promise of an answer, or rather to chart a path towards an answer as, in the words of one of its most prominent public supporters, Mohammad Khatami, every dialogue, based on a presumption of worth of the Other, 'provides grounds for human creativity to flourish.'[61] Furthermore, as the Indian post-colonial theorist Ashis Nandy has interestingly argued, such an opening also call for a re-engagement with the disowned or repressed traditions that make up the European experience for 'any alternative form of dialogue between cultures cannot but attempt to rediscover the subjugated West and make it an ally.'[62]

Finally, the present international situation places on all of us a moral obligation to pursue an active politics of inter-civilizational understanding by engaging in a concrete practice of cross-cultural dialogue. It cannot be ignored that since 9/11, the shadow of a 'clash of civilizations' came hammering down on the world with incredible velocity, leaving in its wake an atmosphere of fear and war. With this context in mind, a politics of understanding would already be a great achievement. But to effectively face this challenge at its roots we need to imagine an exit from the strict grid of choices imposed by the contemporary Western-centric and liberal global order and move towards the construction of a multicultural and peaceful world order.

The Contemporary Relevance of the Critical Stance of 'Orientalism'
As I have argued the future world order, adequate for a multicultural and globalized international society, cannot be only liberal and Western-centric: it will require a 'thick' conception of the presence of different cultures and civilizations. This implies the need for a pluralist spatial ordering as a realistic way to preserve the cultural pluralism of the world and to counter the monological universalism of the spaceless and expansive cosmopolitan liberalism, a political tradition which moreover overlooks the centrality of cultural and religious identity in the political practice of 'really existing communities'.[63] Ashis Nandy has aptly made this point even in the context of current predominant forms and processes of dialogue of civilisations:

> a conversation of cultures subverts itself when its goal becomes a culturally
> integrated world, not a pluricultural universe where each culture can hope to live

[59] See Petito, 'The Global Political Discourse'.

[60] Jean Bethke Elshtain (1999) 'Really Existing Communities', *Review of International Studies* 25 (1): 141-46.

[61] Mohammad Khatami, speech at the UN General Assembly, New York, 21 September 1998, www.parstimes.com/history/khatami_speech_un.html (accessed on 1 August 2008).

[62] Ashis Nandy (1998) 'A New Cosmopolitanism: Towards a Dialogue of Asian Civilizations' in Kuan-Hsing Chen (ed.) *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge), p. 146.

[63] See Elsthain, "Really Existing Communities".

in dignity with its own distinctiveness. The nineteenth-century (sic) dream of one world and global governance has made this century the most violent in human experience and the coming century is likely to be very sceptical towards all ideas of cultural co-existence and tolerance that seek to cope with mutual hostilities and intolerance by further homogenizing an increasingly uniform world and within the format of nineteenth century theories of progress or social evolutionism.[64]

What this point brings radically into question is what, following in Edward Said's footsteps, we are now used to calling the 'Orientalist mindset', that is, the view which assumes the superiority of the Western civilisation *qua* the rational culmination in the development of human history.[65] Said's *Orientalism*, in fact, can be thought of – even if this was not necessarily part of its author's intentions – as the intellectual text of the "cultural revolt against the West" since it argues for the necessity of the 'oriental' world to free itself from the intellectual tutelage (protectorate) of the western world.[66] Describing and powerfully denouncing the political function of 'Orientalism' as a discourse inextricably linked to the colonial enterprise, Said's critique can be extended to our post-colonial global condition to make sense of the power/knowledge nexus of the contemporary Western-centric and liberal predicament whereby liberalism – contrary to its self-proclaimed universalism, neutrality and fairness[67]– is revealed as the new civilising and empowering discourse sustaining the Western-centric nature of contemporary international society.

This 'Orientalist mindset', which takes the form of a self-proclaimed superiority of Western liberalism – with its corollary of the construction of an illiberal East -, is unquestionably a roadblock to the path of dialogue of civilisations and it arguably plays into the hands of the believers and supporters of the clash of civilisations. As Joseph Camilleri has powerfully argued with reference to the need for a future a "mutually beneficial and transformative encounter" between Europe and the Muslim world:

> Of all the tasks ahead perhaps none is more pressing than the far-reaching reassessment of the 'Orientalist' conception of the world… The tendency of much European thought to understate the extraordinary accomplishments of Islamic civilisation and to overstate its moral or intellectual deficiencies must be rectified. More importantly, the Occident must come to understand that it cannot read the 'Oriental' other purely or even primarily in terms of norms and benchmarks which tautologically affirm its own self-confessed superiority. The problems of the 'Orient', many of which in fact bear the European footprint,

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[64] Ashis Nandy, "A New Cosmopolitanism: Towards a Dialogue of Asian Civilizations", in *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, ed. Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1998), 148.

[65] Edward Said, *Orientalism*: *Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Penguin Books, 1978). The argument of *Orientalism*, which is regarded as a founding text of post-colonial theory, has acquired a life of its own influencing a huge and variegated body of scientific litterature as well as political positions, sometimes well beyond the intentions of its author.

[66] In the new afterword written for the 1995 edition of *Orientalism*, Said responding to the unexpected and unwelcome use of his work by radical islamists, strongly dissociates the politics of *Orientalism* from the raise of Politica Islam and other forms of anti-Western fundementalist politics. See Edward Said, "Afterword to the 1995 Printing", in *Orientalism* (Penguin Books, 1978): 338. For the classical statement of the 'Revolt against the West', see Hedley Bull, "The Revolt against the West", in Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds., *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 217-228.

[67] For the standard articulation of liberalism as fairness see John Rawls' influential book, *A Theory of Justice*. For the application of Rawls' Political Liberalism to the realm of international society see Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*.

cannot be resolved by the singular or unilinear application of European models and experiences. Nor for that matter can the Occident afford to grapple with its multiple anxieties and insecurities by projecting them on to the "Oriental' Other, to the 'crescent of crisis' in the Middle East, or to 'Islamic terrorim'...Europe cannot afford to press Islam to opt for Western-style modernity at the very moment that western voices are increasingly drawing attention to modernity's spiritual, ethical, aesthetic and ecological deficit.[68]

In these words are many of the converging points between the conceptual constellations of *Orientalism* as a critique/critical stance and dialogue of civilisations. Clearly the critique of the 'Orientalist mindset' is a prerequisite for a sincere and genuine dialogue of civilizations. But what is even more important in the theoretical economy of my argument is that the political discourse of dialogue of civilisations represents not only a radical critique of the present Western-centric and liberal global predicament and its 'Orientalist mindset' but also a positive call for the reopening and re-discussion of the core (Western-centric and liberal) assumptions upon which its normative structure is based; in other words, the political discourse of dialogue of civilisations represents, in my view, a positive-constructive idea for a new spatial multicultural and peaceful world order. The theory of dialogue of civilizations, in fact, has to move beyond the Orientalist critique of the (Euro-centric first, and then Western-centric) nature of contemporary international relations and envisages a new global order as a construction of an inter-civilisational dialogical encounter capable of creating, in Gadamer's words, these "new normative and common solidarities that let practical reason speak again" in a way that is appropriate to the new global predicament.[69]

In Defence of Dialogue of Civilizations: 'Orientalism' and the Politics of 'Strong' Identities
Moving beyond its mainly critical stance and pointing to a positive vision for a peaceful and multicultural global order, the political discourse of dialogue of civilizations, I would contend, entertains an ambiguous relationship with *Orientalism*: if, on one hand, it fully includes the main insights of Said by criticising the description of civilisations as essentialised, static and monolithic identities as well as by acknowledging the risk of an intellectual/political construction of the Other;[70] then on the other hand, it opposes Said's implicit view on the relationship between 'strong' cultural-religious identities and political violence as well as maintaining a certain scepticism about the conceptual possibility of a genuine dialogue that seems at times to be suggested by the omnipresence-of-power thesis endorsed by Orientalism critical/Foucauldian stance. These two theoretical tensions are not

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[68] Joseph A. Camilleri, "Between Europe and the Middle East: Episodic Geopolitics or Transformative Encounter", paper delivered at the Fondazione Mediterraneo, Naples, 21 April 2005, 14.

[69] Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, 87. Here it should be mentioned that Bryan Turner has argued that Said's Orientalism remains committed to a positive 'ethics of cosmopolitan care', see Bryan Turner, "Edward E. Said: Overcoming Orientalism", *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 1 (2004): 173-77.

[70] I cannot elaborate here for reasons of space on my understanding and defence of the category of civilization. Let me only mention that there exists today a large body of theoretical literature on this phenomenology and it can indeed be argued that in contemporary social theory there is a growing interest in the idea of civilisation both as an object of study and an analytical category. See the two recent special issues on civilisation and civilisational analysis of *Thesis Eleven* 62, no. 1 (2000) and *International Sociology* 16, no. 3 (2001). In particular, see Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "The Civilisational Dimension in Sociological Analysis", *Thesis Eleven* 62, no. 1 (2000): 1-21; Edward A. Tiryakian, "Introduction: The Civilisation of Modernity and the Modernity of Civilisations", *International Sociology* 16, no. 3 (2001): 277-92; and Johann P. Arnason, "Civilisational Patterns and Civilizing Processes", *International Sociology* 16, no. 3 (2001): 387-405. More broadly for the field of sociology of civilisation see Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilisations and Multiple Modernities*, 2 vols. (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003) and Johann P. Arnason, *Civilisations in Dispute: Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003). See also, Fabio Petito 'The contemporary ambiguities of religions as a source of civilizational identity in International Relations'.

relevant *qua* a specific critique of Said's argument – it should be noticed that Said continued to elaborate on the thesis of *Orientalism* for twenty-five years after its publication expanding, revising and improving its argument –[71] but they are relevant insofar as they allow a further deepening of the idea of dialogue of civilisations. Let me discuss briefly these two conceptual tensions.

Unquestionably one of *Orientalism*'s greatest merits has been to acknowledge the risk of an intellectual/political construction of the cultural Other. To warn against the political exercise of the construction of the Self through opposition to a negative-valued, dangerous or threatening Other is of great topicality in a time when the discourses of the clash of civilisations as well as the 'us versus them' and 'good/evil' oppositions have acquired a worryingly prominent place in the public spheres of many different countries. But as Said himself puts it, the main intellectual issue raised by *Orientalism* is: "Can one divide human reality into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions…and survive the consequences humanly?"[72] This is a question that poses also an important challenge to the discourse of dialogue of civilisations. It is a critique that cannot easily be dismissed as it is widely and sincerely held not only by liberals but also by a large spectrum of secular-minded and humanist scholars: this view is in fact deeply rooted in that constitutive intellectual-political experience of modernity, which Scott Thomas has effectively called the "Westphalian presumption", according to which the assertiveness of religious and cultural differences in the political realm is doomed to lead to instability, conflicts and political violence and therefore must be privatised if there is to be international order.[73]

From this perspective, the emphasis on civilizations, cultures, and religions - even if within the framework of a dialogical mode - risks activating the politically dangerous mechanism of the Self/Other opposition. For this reason Said had a certain understandable uneasiness towards such broad cultural categories as the Orient and the West and persuasively argued for a critique of essentialised identities on the ground that civilizations are hybrid, historically constructed by encounters, exchanges, impure by definition, are always internally contested and are objects of a plurality of interpretation.[74] This is also why he opposed the romantic interpretation of cultures as internally coherent and organically sealed and even identified in the historicism of Vico and Herder, scholars to which he acknowledges an intellectual debt in other important ways, the roots of dangerous nationalist tendencies.[75] A similar concern has also recently been voiced by the Indian Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen who has accused what he has dubbed a 'civilization-based thinking' of being extremely dangerous and one which can be deleterious not only when used in the theory of the clash of civilisations but also in its well-meaning attempts of dialogue.[76]

This view, which assumes a link between 'strong' religious-cultural identities and political violence, is in my view implicit in Said's critique of the construction of the Self through the

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[71] For a nuanced interpretation of Said's intellectual journey attentive to the important clarifications and adjustements to the set of arguments put forward in *Orientalism*, see the chapter by Fred Dallmayr, "Speaking Truth to Power: In Memory of Edward Said", in *Small Wonder: Global Power and its Discontent* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publichers, 2005), 94-114.

[72] Said, *Orientalism*, 45.

[73] See Scott Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

[74] See also Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

[75] For Vico and Herder as precursors of 20th century historicism with its emphasis on organicistic and nationalist-prone view of culture, see Said, *Orientalism*, 118.

[76] See Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

opposition to a negative-valued Other as well as rather explicit in Sen's recent volume bearing the self-explanatory title: *Identity and Violence*. More generally, this thesis has provided one of the predominant interpretative frameworks on the nature of post-Cold War political violence and instability, whether in the form of the new ethno-religious civil wars driven by the politics of identity, or the replacement by religious fundamentalists and fanatics of the political with 'apocalyptic millenarianism' possibly portending the lethal combination of martyrs with weapons of mass destruction or even scenarios involving possible conflicts and confrontations on large cultural-religious scale as in the case of a coming clash of civilisations.[77]

From the perspective of Said and Sen, there is a sense that to prevent cultural or religious inspired political violence, the only ways are either to stress the necessarily multiple and unstable nature of cultural-religious identities or to call for their 'privatisation'. What this argument, which holds a powerful academic status both because of the 'Westphalian' experience and a certain implicit bias of social sciences (as part of the Enlightenment project) against cultural and religious traditions, overlooks is the theoretical and empirical point that is increasingly emerging from a number of recent strands of research according to which this kind of political violence is often characterised by doctrinally 'weak' and superficial religious or cultural identities as these are the most conducive substratum to violent politicisation by political entrepreneurs.[78]

With reference to religiously-inspired political violence, arguably the paradigmatic and most difficult test for the above-mentioned thesis, the protestant theologian Miroslav Volf, a Croatian immigrant to the US, who was personally confronted with this phenomenon first through the use of Christianity in the harrowing civil war in ex-Yugoslavia and then through the fundamentalist politics of his own American coreligionists, has effectively argued that the political violence legitimized by religion is normally the result of the politicisation of a "vague religiosity" conceived of as exclusively a private affairs of individuals or reduced to "cultural resources endowed with a diffuse aura of sacred".[79] In other words and contrary to the predominant view, religiously-inspired political violence would be characterized by 'weak' religious identities that are up-rooted and banalised and have often not been sustained by a process of transmission of tradition. On the contrary, doctrinally 'strong' religious identities would rather be more common in religious actors involved in processes of conflict-resolution and peace-making.[80]

In addition, as some contemporary research in the field of sociology of religion suggests with specific reference to the rise of Christian fundamentalism (although the same could apply to other forms of religious extremism), there seems to be a correlation between the so-called individualisation and subjectivisation of belief, referred to as' light religion', and the rise of an assertive commmunitarianism manifesting the conservative moral positions and political

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[77] See respectively Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991) and Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*.

[78] For the mechanisms at work in the violent politicisation of religion see the two chapters by Carsten Bagge Lausten and Ole Wæver, "In Defence of Religion: Sacred Referent Objects for Securitization" and Andreas Hasenclever and Volker Ritteberger, "Does Religion Make a Difference? Theoretical Approaches to the Impact of Faith on Political Conflict", in *Religion in International Relations*, 147-80 and 107-45.

[79] Miroslav Volf, "Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Justice: A Theological Contribution to a More Peaceful Social Enviroment", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29, no. 3 (2000): 862 and 866.

[80] See R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000) and Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, eds., *Religion: The Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994)

orientations of a 'strong religion'.[81] This would reinforce the view that when cultural and religious identities are vague and stripped of a thick reference to an ongoing tradition, politicization provides a mechanism to supplement a 'light' cultural-religious tradition and consolidate the community of the (religious or secular) faithful around a small number of political 'hot issues', as the 'culture war' of the American domestic politics of the last decades seems to suggest, as well as the politicisation of religion in the nationalist construction of the Other in the Balkans of the 1990s has proved.[82]

Summing up this first conceptual tension, the idea of dialogue of civilisations endorses the radical critique of *Orientalism* and, in particular, of the contemporary 'Orientalist mindset', but contrary to Said and Sen does not regard 'civilization-based thinking' as politically dangerous and irresponsible and calls, in a qualified sense and in order to oppose religious and cultural inspired political violence (as well as to construct a more peaceful global order), for 'more' religious and cultural traditions rather than less. As also Peter Berger has noted: "Contrary to currently fashionable assumptions, the difference between civilizations in not a threat in itself but rather a precondition to formulating identities that are characterised by a certain degree of stability".[83]

This allows the political discourse of dialogue of civilisations to move beyond the critique of the present Western-centric and liberal global predicament and to engage in the challenge of mapping out a new positive vision for the construction of a new peaceful and multicultural spatial order.

Beyond 'Orientalism': On the Diverging Agreement between Edward Said and Louis Massignon
There is also a second point of tension between *Orientalism* and the idea of a civilizational dialogue and relates to Said's scepticism towards the theoretical possibility of a genuine dialogue given the omnipresence-of-power thesis implied by *Orientalism*'s critical (Foucauldian) stance. Here rather than entering into a complex argument on the philosophical nature and political implications of the theoretical framework assumed by the thesis of *Orientalism*, I want to briefly point to Said's ambiguous and problematic reading of Louis Massignon (1883-1962) - the great French orientalist - as part of *Orientalism*. In contrast to Said, it seems to me that Massignon's work and life stand as a very concrete proof of the possibility of a real and productive dialogue of civilisations that can escape the yoke of the *Orientalist* accusation.

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[81] Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Le pèlerin et le converti. La religion en mouvement* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999) and Jean-Pierre Bastian, Françoise Champion and Kathy Rousselet, eds., *La globalisation du religieux* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001). For an in-depth and comprehensive research project on religious fundamentalism with empirical studies on all the major religious traditions, see the five volumes by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *The Fundamentalism Project*, vols. 1-5 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991-1995).

[82] For the American 'culture war', see James Davidson Hunter, "The American Culture War", in *The Limits of Social Cohesion: Conflict and Mediation in Pluralist Societies*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 1-37. For the role of religion and nationalism in the end of Yugoslavia, see David Campbell, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity, and Justice in Bosnia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). Interestingly Campbell starts his analysis with the following quotation from a Bosnian woman, which reveals the 'light' nature of the religious-nationalist consciousness before the war started: "I am a Muslim", she told us, "but I didn't know that before the war. Before the war, of course, we were all atheists!", 1. For a enlightening discussion of how the issue of religion and culture interacts in the context of nationalist projects see, Anthony D. Smith, "The 'Sacred' Dimension of Nationalism", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29, no. 3 (2000): 791-814.

[83] Peter Berger, 'Conclusion', *The Limits of Social Cohesion*, (1998), 372

To summarise the life of Massignon in a paragraph is a self-defeating attempt. To say that he has been the greatest French Orientalist of the 20th century is, in a way, reductive and to some extent it misses the point. The 'cheikh admirable', as his major biography published so far effectively calls him,[84] was not only the great scholar whose monumental four volumes work on the Bagdad martyr mystique al Hallâj is regarded as one of the great academic research of the 20th century, but also, as Christian Jambet as rightly pointed out in a recently published very important collection of Massignon's writings, was "a pioneer in the domain of art and Christian spirituality...a complex character: a major witness of the French colonial empire, then a man engaged in the struggles of the peoples for their independence ; a believer of the religion of Abraham, attached to the unique virtue of the Jewish people as well as to the inalienable rights of the Arab victims of the partition of Palestine".[85]

When one reads the pages of Orientalism devoted to Louis Massignon, one feels that the theoretical machinery of *Orientalism* is slipping. Leaving aside the specific assessment put forward by Said of Massignon's scholarship, something that would require a complete different direction of research, what the discussion reveals more broadly is this scepticism as to the theoretical possibility and (even political opportunity) of a dialogue of civilisation. For Massignon, the dialogical approach was the foundation of his scholarly and political engagement.[86] In a way that neatly resembles to the Gadamerian hermeneutics of dialogue as 'fusion of horizons' in the form of being able to 'stand in the other's shoes', Massignon argued that: "To understand something is not to annex it, it is to transfer by decentring oneself (*par décentrement*) to the heart of the other…the essence of language should be a kind of decentring. We can make ourselves understood only by entering the system of the other".[87] This decentring implies for Massignon what he calls a "science of compassion" which is about living and sharing the sufferings and the aspirations for justice of the Other and it is based on what he has guarded as the main existential lesson from his encounter with Islam, "l'hospitalité sacrée", the sacred hospitality towards the stranger and in particular the weak and the poor.[88]

For Said, who at times acknowledges and praises Massignon's tireless engagement in favour of Muslim civilisation – "one would be foolish not to respect the sheer genius and novelty of Massingon's mind" -[89], this sympathetic approach was nevertheless part of the problem and instrumental to that "summational attitude" which was ultimately about making a relatively uncomplicated statement about the Orient as a whole:[90] to the point that he could say that: "seen in such a way, Massignon is less mythologized 'genius' then he is a kind of system for producing certain kinds of statements, disseminated into the large mass of discursive

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[84] Christian Destremau and Jean Moncelon, *Louis Massignon: le "cheikh admirable"* (Lectoure : Le Capucin, 2005).

[85] Louis Massignon, *Ècrits Mémorables*, 2 vol., (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2009), quotation by Christian Jambet, back cover.

[86] See the collection of essays presented at UNESCO in 1992 on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of Massignon's death entitled *Louis Massignon et le dialogue des cultures* (Paris: Les Éditions du CERF, 1996). For the dialogical approach as a central dimension of Massignon's work see the chapters in the just-mentioned volume by Jacques Waardenburg, "L'approche dialogique de Louis Massignon", 177-200 and Herbert Mason, "Réflexion sur Louis Massignon et son legs du dialogue", 171-75.

[87] Louis Massignon, "L'involution sémantique dans les cultures sémitiques", *Opera Minora*, vol. II, (Paris: Presse Universitaire de France, 1969): 631.

[88] See the collection of unpublished texts (including his important correspondence with Mary Kahil) by Louis Massignon, *L' hospitalité sacrée*, ed. Jacques Keryell (Paris: Nouvelle cité, 1987). See also Jacques Berque, "Une réponse de Louis Massignon sur l'Islam", in *Louis Massignon et le dialogue des cultures*, 19-31.

[89] Said, *Orientalism*, 269.

[90] Said, *Orientalism*, 255.

formations that together make up the archive, or cultural material, of his time".[91] Here I cannot discuss in depth the reasons for this problematic reading of Massignon, but one element seems to me important to outline: Massignon was indeed committed to the search of the originality and authenticity of civilisational and religious phenomenologies as he believed that the fact that world civilisations were the product of borrowings and encounters, what he even called syncretism, did not imply the lack of a 'fundamental originality', which was actually discernable in the way those borrowed and exchanged elements had been ordered and organised.[92]

Such an idea of a 'fundamental originality' is unquestionably a form of essentialism too far away from Said's intellectual references. Such a search, however, was for Massignon an important dimension of his scholarly engagement and actually an integral part of that journey between Self and Other leading to discovery of that deeper 'unity in diversity'. And how it could have been otherwise for that young adult atheist who had been converted to his original faith, Christianity, through the encounter with Islam? To that man to whom, as he would use to narrate in his old age, God spoke first of all in Arabic? In a sketchy and evocative way, the deep anchorage of Massignon into his Catholic faith and his cultural community of destiny, France, was never an obstacle to reaching a higher level of universality but was rather the necessary pre-condition for any transgressive creative journey, as was the case of his elaboration of a theology of Abramithic religions whose impact on the recent history of Christianity and Muslim-Christian relationships has already been very significant and whose daring intellectual insights and *élan* are still far from having exhausted their potential.[93] But these were the arguments of someone who has also been described as a mystic and arguably resonated at a different (but not incompatible) level to Said's secular humanism.

Returning to the present times, the tension between Massignon and Said, and therefore, between dialogue of civilisations and the critique of *Orientalism* is also interestingly mirrored in the different replies the two authors developed against the thesis of a coming clash of cultures. Writing in the aftermath of 9/11, Said concluded his excellent critical essay entitled "The Clash of Ignorance" with the following words:

> These are tense times, but it is better to think in terms of powerful and powerless communities, the secular politics of reason and ignorance, and universal principles of justice and injustice, than to wander off in search of vast abstractions that may give momentary satisfaction but little self-knowledge or informed analysis.[94]

Fifty years before, in 1952, Massignon had written an essay for *Politique Étrangère*, the reference review for the French foreign policy community, which was surprisingly recently republished in 2006 on the occasion of the 70th anniversary issue of this journal. As the title of this essay written at the time of the decolonisation struggle – "L'Occident devant l'Orient:

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[91] Ibid., 274.

[92] Louis Massignon, "Interprétation de la civilisation arabe dans la culture française", *Opera Minora*, vol. I, 187-202.

[93] Here I would like to mention those hugely erudite and amazing texts known as 'The Three Prayers of Abraham' that Massignon revised throughout all his life, from his return to Christianity in 1908 to his death in 1962, but which were only fully published a few years ago thanks to the editorial work of his son Daniel Massignon, see Louis Massignon, *Les trois prières d'Abraham* (Paris: Les Éditions du CERF, 1997). Overall, I believe that the life and intellectual contribution of Louis Massignon deserve a more in-depth analysis in the context of the idea and theory of dialogue of civilisations.

[94] Said, "The Clash of Ignorance", 3.

Primauté d'une solution culturelle" –[95] makes clear beyond all doubt, in front of a potential clash between the European and the Muslim worlds, for Massignon the priority and primacy should be given to a cultural solution, "a solution of justice possible by means of exemplary names and maxims of wisdom; which the instincts of masses understand".[96] In other words and contrary to Said's argument mentioned above, we need not escape into a realm of entirely universal maxims but rather excavate even more profoundly into the fundamental originality of our different cultures, trough a sympathetic dialogue, to find that justice which, whether in the colonial era or in the post-colonial predicament, can deeply resonate as authentic and true justice in the peoples' collective psychologies. Here, it is clear that Massignon was also thinking of the hugely exemplary and influential role of Ghandi, which he admired and whose writings and 'poor means' to the service of Truth – non-violence, prayer and fasting - became more and more important in the last part of his life.[97] Therefore, in 'diverging agreement', Massignon and Said oppose the 'Orientalist mindset' which nowadays risks leading to a dangerous 'clash of ignorance', but for Massignon the solution has still to be found within the cultural horizons of civilizational traditions, in a spirit of dialogue which is at the same respectful of a true cultural pluralism and open to a new dialogical 'unity in diversity'.

Conclusions

As Hedley Bull has argued, the emergence of a 'multicultural international society' imperatively requires a *new normative structure* since "we have… to recognise that the nascent cosmopolitan culture of today, like the international society which it helps to sustain, is weighted in favour of the dominant cultures of the West".[98] The political discourse of dialogue of civilisations is meant to address this imbalance by reopening and re-defining of the core Western-centric and liberal assumptions upon which the normative structure of the contemporary international society is based. Today as pre-condition such a course requires the struggle against the 'Orientalist mindset' that Said rightly criticises for contributing to the construction of the Self through the opposition to a negative-valued, dangerous or threatening Other: in the powerful words of Frantz Fanon, what needs to be challenged is the imposition by the dominant group of its own image, an image of inferiority, upon the subjugated.[99]

Dialogue is an open-ended process, which frequently involves difficulties, and there is no guarantee that it can produce a cross-cultural consensus; but it unquestionably raises, however, the reasonable hope to foster mutual understanding if the parties approach it with a genuine attitude open to reciprocal learning. From a hermeneutical perspective, for genuine understanding to be achieved the participants have to come to see things from a new perspective and to this extent a change in the horizons and traditions that they inhabit - constitutive of their identities - must have taken place. Such mutual understanding is of great topicality today to avoid what Said feared as a threatening 'clash of ignorance'. In my argument 'dialogue of civilizations' goes even beyond that: whether in the empirically-grounded (though daring) statement of Bikhu Parekh according to whom "since each culture is inherently limited, a dialogue between them is mutually beneficial"; or in Taylor's more

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[95] Louis Massignon, "L'Occident devant l'Orient: Primauté d'une solution culturelle (1952)", *Politique Étrangère*, no.4 (2006): 1033-38.

[96] Ibid., 1038, my translation.

[97] Louis Massignon, "L'exemplarité singulière de Gandhi", *Opera Minora*, vol. III, 355-6**.** Guy Harpigny has talked of a "gandhian cycle" with reference to the last period of life of Massignon from the end of WWII till his death in 1962; see *Islam et christianisme selon Louis Massignon* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Service d'impression de l'Université catholique, 1981).

[98] Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, 305.

[99] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Books, 2001 [1961]).

cautious 'presumption of worth' which involves in his own words "something like an act of faith" about a world where different cultures complement each other as in the case of Herder, who, as Taylor continues, "for instance, has a view of divine providence, according to which all this variety of culture was not mere accident but was meant to bring about a greater harmony"; the argument here is that, in Khatami's words, every dialogue, based on a presumption of the worth of the Other, "provides grounds for human creativity to flourish".[100]

This human creativity was at work in an extraordinary way in Louis Massignon whose openness to dialogue or, even better, whose dialogical life-journey, has put the bases to turn upside down century of misunderstanding and mistrust between Christianity, Islam and Judaism: his theology of the sacred hospitality of the Abrahamitic faiths has opened the possibility for the three faiths to inhabit a shared perspective without renouncing to their fundamental originality. This is why, in diverging agreement with Said, I have argued that Massignon's work and life stand as a very concrete proof – a true paradigmatic icon - of the possibility of a 'dialogue of civilisations' that escapes the yoke of the *Orientalist* accusations and dares to speak his name even in not-always welcoming academic contexts.

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[100] Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (London: MacMillan Press, 2000), 337; Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", 66 and 73; for Khatami, see fn. 61.