

# ASIA AND WESTERN DOMINANCE

## Retrospect and prospect\*

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**Abstract** This paper considers the conflicts between the West and Asia in the age of globalization and its concomitant ideology of liberal values. It concludes that while the material wealth of the West is welcome everywhere, Asia has resisted, and will continue to resist, the attempts to homogenize Asian culture. The paper argues that the West should accept differences in human rights, ecological policies and forms of governments, and limit itself to the equalization of opportunities for commerce and trade.

**Keywords** Asia, Westernization, culture, development.

**JEL classifications** B3, Z1.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

My theme is the complex interrelationships between the great Eurasian civilizations since the fifteenth-century Age of Discovery. One of the books that fired my imagination as a young student was by Sardar K. M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance*, which was published in 1953. It provided a rounded non-Eurocentric account of Asia's encounter with the West, from the arrival of Vasco da Gama off the coast of Kerala in Calicut in 1498, till the sunset of the British Raj in India in 1947 and the emergence of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Panikkar was very much an establishment figure and his book represents the world-view of the Indian establishment circa 1950.

When I reread Panikkar's book, after nearly half a century, I was pleasantly surprised to see how much of the book still retained its resonance, although, not surprisingly, many of his prognoses have not materialized. It seemed opportune to

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base this discussion, in which I mainly want to outline the lineaments of an emerging confrontation between Asia and the West, by looking at the historic engagement between the great Eurasian civilizations since the voyages of discovery so ably delineated by Panikkar, and to examine the extent to which his and Nehru's hopes of an independent and strong Asia melding its own traditions with the modernity that the West had forced on it have been achieved.

## 2. RETROSPECT

### (a) The age of the Crusades

Panikkar distinguishes five periods in the West's modern engagement with Asia. It began as a crusade. The Portuguese desire to outflank the Muslim power by finding a passage around the Cape of Good Hope to the Indies was the Eighth Crusade – as Panikkar calls it. The Portuguese saw themselves as cutting off the lucrative spice trade of the Muslims, who with their rapid conquests linking the worlds of the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean, had control over the traditional trading routes through the Levant. 'The attack on the spice trade', writes Panikkar, 'as Albuquerque clearly explained to his soldiers at Malacca, was an attack on the financial prosperity of the Muslim nations, an aspect of economic warfare the significance of which both the Muslim Powers and Portugal fully realised' (p. 480).

In India, various Hindu kingdoms in the Deccan, including the empire of Vijayanagar, were equally at odds with their Muslim neighbours. They were willing to aid and abet the Portuguese, except when they tried to wage war on them. Despite their supremacy at sea, in these land-based wars the Portuguese usually lost. They could at best maintain a few outposts on land – tolerated by the native rulers – which were the links in the chain by which they projected their sea power, which allowed them to challenge the Muslim traders and increasingly monopolize the spice trade for themselves – financed, one might add, by the merchants of Antwerp! During this period, the Portuguese got on well with the non-Muslim people they encountered, and were not as bent on propagating Christianity among the heathen as in defeating Islam.

### (b) The age of commerce

This crusading period came to an end with the Reformation which shattered the unity of Christendom, and the gradual decline in the power of Islam, which was confirmed at the battle of Lepanto. It was replaced by a period when commerce and Christianity were both sought to be exported to Asia. But in the late seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries trade was the major interest of the Western powers, and evangelization was definitely on the back-burner.

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The Western powers were content to set up trading outposts on the coast, and whenever they sought to extend their territory they got a bloody nose. A couple of examples should suffice. In 1739 the Dutch had to surrender ignominiously to the Raja of Travancore, while at the beginning of the century, 'the attempt by the British to extend their authority to the villages near Madras had led to their forcible eviction by the local authorities' (p. 94).

### (c) The age of conquest

This changed during the age of conquest (1750–1857). Initiated by the British in India, this era was again not based on any overwhelming Western military power on the land, though they reigned supreme on the sea. In both India in the eighteenth century and China in the nineteenth, the Western powers were able to take advantage of the crumbling of the central authority of the Moghul and Manchu empires, and their collapse into war-lordism. With various local competitors for the title of the local warlord, the British fished successfully in these troubled waters.

The foreign merchants in the ports intervened on the side that promised the most liberal rewards and concessions. In this they were helped by the native merchant class which had grown rich and powerful as agents of the foreign merchants. Thus, as Panikkar sardonically remarks, the famed battle of Plassey in 1757, which set Britain on its path of the conquest of Bengal and subsequently India, was 'a transaction, not a battle, a transaction by which the compradors of Bengal, led by Jagat Seth, sold the Nawab to the East India company' (p. 100). The subsequent conquest of India involved similar perfidious deals, diplomacy and only later open warfare with weakened and isolated adversaries. The carving of the Chinese 'melon' in the nineteenth century is a similar story. What this has left in the historical memories of contemporary elites in these countries is a fear of fissiparous tendencies as well as of their native mercantile and commercial classes.

### (d) The age of empire

The next phase from the mid-nineteenth century till the First World War was the high noon of the Empire. With the quickening Industrial Revolution, and having beaten off its continental rivals, by the end of the Napoleonic wars Britain was supreme. The jewel in the crown of its empire was India, with the government of India behaving more and more as an independent power with its own Imperial ambitions.

It was during this phase that the imperial powers, particularly the British in India and the Dutch in Indonesia, had to administer vast territories, and needed both to create modern administrations as well as develop a large body of indigenous administrators. The former led to what Panikkar recognizes as the most enduring legacy of the West, at least in India – the introduction of the Rule of Law: a principle which was alien to the native legal traditions, where being able

to sue a prince was considered unthinkable, and custom rather than contract ruled.

But the latter – the need for local people to administer the empire – was as momentous. For it created the Macaulay's children who were to ultimately challenge these mighty empires. In his famous Minute on education, whereby the British began to set up English-language schools and colleges in India, Macaulay summed up the aim as being to raise a native English educated middle class 'who maybe interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern: a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect'.

### (e) The age of nationalism and Western retreat

This creation of an English-speaking class of 'creoles', however, also led to the rise of nationalism – the characteristic of the next age in the encounter between Asia and the West – the period of retreat beginning with the First World War and ending with the hauling down of the Union Jack at the Red Fort in Delhi on 15 August 1947. Panikkar is understandably rather romantic in his views about the mainsprings of nationalism, tracing it – as had been common – to the legacy of the French Revolution. But as Benedict Anderson (1991) has cogently argued, most Asian nationalism was a 'creole' revolt similar to that in the Americas – both in the North and the South. The major complaint of the 'creoles' against the '*peninsulares*' was that even though in every respect – language, descent, customs – they were indistinguishable from their metropolitan cousins, they nevertheless had an inferior status because of the accident of their birth. 'There was nothing to be done about it', writes Anderson, 'he was *irremediably* a creole. Yet how irrational his exclusion must have seemed! Nonetheless, hidden inside the irrationality was this logic: born in the Americas, he could not be a true Spaniard; ergo born in Spain the *peninsular* could not be a true American' (p. 58).

In India, Macaulay's children, too, had an inferior status, despite being English in every respect except 'in blood and colour'. Like the American creole elites, they first sought to remove these restrictions on their advancement, for example, by agitating for the exams for the fabled Indian Civil Service to be held in India so that more of them could join the mandarinat which ruled India. When these demands fell on deaf ears, they sought to exclude their *peninsulares* from their colony with the cry of full independence.

As Panikkar noted, similar trends of creating WOGS – Westernised oriental gentlemen, as the British derisively called them – were to be found all over Asia, as their best and brightest found their way to Western seats of learning. Japan after the Meiji Restoration, 'sent selected young men to understand the secrets of Europe. China's "first hundred" promoted by the Great Viceroy Tsang Kuo-fan was an abortive attempt in the same line. . . . A similar movement took large numbers of Indo Chinese students to Paris and Indonesians to Leiden' (p. 489). In

every Asian country 'the leadership of the movement which ultimately displaced European supremacy belonged to those who had been trained by the West under the aegis of imperialism' (p. 490).

This feeling of exclusion of Macaulay's children which in large part provoked the nationalist revolt against Western domination was heightened by the doctrine of racial superiority that the British, in particular, adopted during the high noon of their empire. Panikkar quotes Lord Kitchener, a distinguished Commander of Chief of India, who declared: 'It is this consciousness of the inherent superiority of the European which has won for us India. However well educated and clever a native may be, and however brave he may have proved himself, I believe that no rank we can bestow on him would cause him to be considered an equal of the British officer' (p. 150).

But it was not always so. In the early years of their dominance, the British behaved as a traditional Indian power and sought to assimilate with the natives. It was after the trauma of the Mutiny that the British converted themselves from 'nabobs' to 'sahibs', setting themselves apart from their subjects, whose good they sought to promote as Platonic Guardians. The notions of racial exclusiveness and the 'white man's burden', so characteristic of the late Imperial phase, were alien to India's early rulers, who exhibited a more robust delight in both the country's mores and its women (see Spear 1963).

The change was linked to the arrival of white women and the Mutiny of 1857, whose causes provide another general trend convincingly explored by Panikkar. The early evangelizing impulse which had been quiescent during the age of trade, came to the fore in the early part of the nineteenth century. The East India Company in its early days had barred Christian missionaries from its domain, and had also tolerated various Indian customs such as infanticide and 'suttee' (widow-burning). Such abnegation came under attack from the Evangelicals, Utilitarians and Radicals who were becoming a growing force in British politics in the early part of the nineteenth century (see Stokes 1959).

Both the Evangelicals, with their adherence to the Gospels, and the Radicals and Utilitarians trusting in the power of Reason, believed in the superiority of Western ways – religious and secular. These groups found traditional Indian society deeply offensive, with its idolatry, superstitions and cruel practices. In William Bentinck, who became Governor-General of India in 1826, they found their champion for Anglicizing Indian society. Bentinck attacked and attempted to reform various Indian social customs in the name of what he considered a universal moral code – Western moral law. The social reforms he instituted, like banning suttee and infanticide, in part led to the first popular nationalist reaction – the Mutiny of 1857. Though easily suppressed, it gave a shock to British self-confidence in their civilizing mission. A conservative Burkean policy was then adopted, of managing change and taking account of local susceptibilities. Paternalism became the hallmark of the Raj with its aloof sahibs and memsahibs and with an element of racial exclusiveness in their dealings with their subjects.

But the introduction of Western learning and Bentinck's attempt at Anglicization also led to a Hindu renaissance, as various reformers like Dayanand Saraswati and Swami Vivekananda sought to purge Hinduism of various objectionable aspects and make it purer. They launched a successful counter-attack against the Christian missionaries' quest for the hearts and soul of Hindus.

The position in various other Asian countries was somewhat different. Both the Chinese and Japanese had excluded Christian missionaries during the age of trade when they saw them as threats to their culture. With the Meiji Restoration, Japan, despite its loss of sovereignty in the unequal treaties it had to sign on its opening, was able to contain Christian proselytizing. China was less lucky, as the missionaries came to be protected under the unequal treaties the Chinese had to sign.

But in much of Asia, the Christian missionaries did not succeed in their evangelical mission. Their converts were most often among the lowest social classes and were held in contempt by their compatriots. In China they 'came to be known contemptuously as "rice Christians"' (p. 428). The indigenous cultures were too strong, and did not accept the exclusive truth of the Christian religion or the cultural superiority of the West.

But in China and Japan there was another aspect of the 'indirect' imperialism practised by the Western powers which tarnished the missionaries' efforts – this was the principle of extra-territoriality, under whose cover, after the Treaty of Tientsin, Christian missionaries in China expanded their efforts, 'often with the support of gun-boats and diplomatic pressure'. Inevitably national sentiment looked upon missionary activity as inimical to the country's interests and native Christians as 'secondary barbarians'.

The economic policies that the Raj followed in India were based on the dominant economic liberalism of the time, with free trade as its cornerstone. Though Panikkar, like so many other nationalist historians, takes an inimical view of the consequences for Indians, in my *Hindu Equilibrium*, I showed that by and large the economic effects were benign. The economic policy of the Raj led to the emergence of an industrial economy in India manned by Indian entrepreneurs, and financed by Indian capital, which in a few decades had succeeded in turning the tables on Lancashire.

Similarly in China, in particular in the interwar years, a thriving indigenous class of entrepreneurs and capitalists grew up, particularly around Shanghai. They were to be the architects of the post-war Asian miracle in Hong Kong, Taiwan and to some extent in Singapore. But partly as a reaction against the dominant economic ideology of the metropole and the traditional suspicion of the commercial classes which had been buttressed by their seeming betrayal of the country to foreigners during the age of conquest, and the fact that free trade was used as an excuse to carve the Chinese 'melon' as well as to open Japan, most of the nationalist Asian elites came to have a profound suspicion of both free trade – enforced by the unequal treaties China and Japan had to sign – and commerce.

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Christianity, free trade and extra-territoriality thus came to be the three demons that the nationalist movements which overthrew the Western empires sought to exorcise. The Russian revolution and the subsequent conversion under Stalin of a poor backward country into a seeming industrial and military giant provided a role model. It seemed to Panikkar and to many of the other nationalists that they could keep the good things the West had brought – science, technology, modern legal traditions, and not least the creation of large multi-ethnic nation-states in India and Indonesia – while throwing off the yoke of these three Western fetters. There was immense hope that Asia was going to be reborn.

### 3. PROSPECT

But these hopes were to be belied. Instead of a period of peace and growing prosperity, Asia in the last fifty years has seen turmoil and mayhem, much worse than anything it had seen in the two centuries of Western dominance. The major fault line was economic. I do not need to repeat the sad history of dirigiste failures flowing from the adoption of the Russian model of development in India and China, nor the sad fate of the newly independent populations under local tyrants, so much so that in many parts of Asia the interests of the common people were probably better served by their imperious colonial governments than their indigenously based predatory successors.

But, in time, most countries in Asia, beginning with Japan soon after its opening, and then the Gang of Four on the Pacific Rim in the late 1960s, and most recently India and China, have begun to see that the free trade and free market economics that they saw as the yokes of Western imperialism are, instead, liberating. The failed Soviet model is being replaced, however fitfully, by what is described by its detractors as the Anglo-Saxon model of development.

#### (a) The Asian model

There was an alternative 'Asian' model pioneered by Japan, which delivered the 'Asian miracle' in the 1970s and 1980s in some of the Gang of Four. But it finally foundered in the recent Asian crisis. It may be instructive to briefly see why.

A central feature of the 'Asian' model – as seen most clearly in Korea but presaged by the development of Japan – is a close linkage between the domestic banking system, industrial enterprises (particularly the biggest) and the government. The fatal danger of this 'model' is that by making the banking system a creature of the government's will, it creates tremendous moral hazard in the domestic banking system, with the bank's having no incentive to assess the credit-worthiness of their borrowers or the quality of the investments their loans are financing, as they know no matter how risky or over-extended their lending they will always be bailed out by the government. This can lead in time to a mountain of bad paper and the *de facto* insolvency of a large part of the domestic



banking system, as has happened in both Korea and Japan. But, as the example of the US savings and loan crisis showed, the mess in the domestic banking system can ultimately be cleared up, as is happening in both Korea and Thailand – with both countries bouncing back after their crises.

But the crisis was partly caused and exacerbated by another factor. The problem of moral hazard common to all banking systems with deposit insurance – though more acute in the case of the countries following the 'Asian' model – has been aggravated by the actions of the IMF and the entrance of foreign banks (subject to moral hazard themselves) as major international lenders. As their loans are usually denominated in dollars linked to LIBOR, borrowing countries maintaining a quasi-fixed exchange rate, find that when faced by a shock requiring a devaluation, the domestic currency burden of the foreign bank debt rises *pari passu* with the changing exchange rate. If the debt is incurred by the private sector, this rising debt burden need pose no problem for the country, for if the relevant foreign banks run, the borrowers can always default on their debt.

But now enter the IMF. Ever since the debt crisis of the 1980s the foreign banks faced by a default on their international loan have argued that this poses a systemic risk to the world's financial system and asked in effect for an international bailout to prevent this catastrophe. The IMF has been more than willing to oblige. This has created substantial *international* moral hazard for the foreign banks – already plagued with domestic moral hazard because of deposit insurance. The IMF has increasingly become the international debt collector for the foreign money central banks, as well as an important tool of US foreign policy. Soon after the Indonesian acceptance of the IMF's programme, Jakarta was plastered with pictures of a grinning managing director of the Fund, towering over a little brown man signing away his country. An understandable nationalist backlash could easily turn into the economic nationalism that in the past half century has blighted Asia's economic prospects.

And there's the rub for the current relations between Asia and the West. For though couched in terms of economic efficiency and the need for good governance to promote prosperity, once again the West is using commerce and Bank-Fund 'conditionality' as a form of extra-territoriality to promote its own morality. The great divide between Asia and the West remains cultural.

### (b) Culture and development

In my recent book, *Unintended Consequences*, I made an important distinction between the *material* and *cosmological* beliefs of different cultures. The former concerns beliefs relating to ways of making a living. The latter to, in Plato's words, 'how we should live'. I argued that the rise of the West was associated with a change in its material and cosmological beliefs from the common Eurasian pattern. This change was due to two Papal revolutions. One concerned the family instituted by Gregory the Great in the late sixth century, which inaugurated



individualism as a major part of the West's cosmological beliefs as contrasted with the 'communalism' of the ancient Eurasian civilizations. The second, by Gregory VII in the eleventh century, created the Church-State, and led to the creation of all the legal and institutional infrastructure needed for the functioning of an efficient market economy. This changed the West's material beliefs away from the suspicion of merchants, markets and commerce which characterized the ancient agrarian civilizations, and eventually led to the Industrial Revolution.

I also argued that, though in the West the change in cosmological and material beliefs was conjoined, there was no necessity for this conjunction. Once the institutional bases for an efficient market economy are known, they can be adopted by societies which do not share the same cosmological beliefs, as witness the examples of Japan and the Gang of Four. It is thus possible to modernize without Westernizing. But this is not found acceptable by our modern-day Western moral crusaders – particularly in the US.

### (c) The US and Empire

With its victory in the Cold War the US is now the world hegemon. But till the events of 11 September threatened the American heartland directly it has been reluctant to act like an Imperial power of yore. In thinking about empires I like to distinguish between *multi-ethnic* and *homogenizing* empires (see Lal 1999a, 2000a). The former included the Abbasids, the various Indian empires, the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and the British, where little attempt was made to change 'the habits of the heart' of the constituent groups – or if it was, as in the early British Raj, an ensuing backlash led to a reversal of this policy.

The homogenizing empires, by contrast, sought to create a 'national' identity out of the multifarious groups in their territory. The best example of these is China, where the ethnic mix was unified as Hans through the bureaucratic device of writing their names in Chinese characters in a Chinese form, and suppressing any subsequent discontent through the subtle repression of a bureaucratic authoritarian state (see Jenner 1992). In our own time the American 'melting pot', creating Americans out of a multitude of ethnicities by adherence to a shared civic culture and a common language, has created a similar homogenized imperial state.

Similarly, the supposedly ancient 'nations' of Britain and France were created through a state-led homogenizing process. India, by contrast, is another Imperial State whose political unity is a legacy of the British Raj, but whose multi-ethnic character is underwritten by an ancient hierarchical structure which accommodates these different groups as different castes.

Given its domestic homogenizing imperial tendencies, the US (along with various other Western countries, which Huntington (1993) has aptly described as a directorate seeking to run the world) the US is attempting to legislate its 'habits of the heart' around the world – 'human rights', democracy, egalitarianism, labour

and environmental standards etc. Its claim that it is thereby promoting universal values is unjustified.

For there is an important difference between the cosmological beliefs of what became the Christian West and the other ancient agrarian civilizations of Eurasia. Christianity has a number of distinctive features which it shares with its Semitic cousin Islam, but not entirely with its parent Judaism, and which apart from Buddhism are not to be found in most of the other great Eurasian religions. It is also important to note that in the two largest Asian civilizations – India and China – the Buddhists lost out a long time ago to their traditional 'religions'.<sup>1</sup> The most important feature of Christianity is its universality. Neither the Jews, nor the Hindu or Sinic civilizations had religions claiming to be universal. You could not choose to be a Hindu, Chinese or Jew; you were born as one. This also meant that, unlike Christianity and Islam, these religions did not proselytize. Third, only the Semitic religions being monotheistic have also been egalitarian. Nearly all the other Eurasian religions believed in some form of hierarchical social order. By contrast, alone among the Eurasian civilizations, the Semitic ones (though least so the Jewish) emphasized the equality of men's souls in the eyes of their monotheistic Deities. Dumont has rightly characterized the resulting profound divide between the societies of *Homo Aequalis* which believe all men are born equal (as the *philosophes*, and the American constitution proclaim) and those of *Homo Hierarchicus*, which believe no such thing. The so-called universal values being promoted by the West are no more than the culture-specific, proselytizing ethic of what remains at heart Western Christendom.<sup>2</sup>

#### (d) Towards a Green imperialism

Nowhere can this be seen as clearly as in the Green agenda being sought to be foisted on the world under the slogan of 'sustainable development'. Their big idea is to prevent climate change by limiting carbon emissions by in effect putting a ban on the burning of fossil fuels. But this will hurt the two Asian giants – India and China – the most, as any limits on their use of fossil fuels for development in the near future poses serious threats to their possibility of developing at all.

For, as economic historians have emphasized, it was not until the Industrial Revolution that humankind found the key to intensive growth – a sustained rise in per capita income – which, as the example of the West and many newly industrializing countries have shown, has the potential of eradicating mass structural poverty – the scourge which in the past was considered to be irremediable (*pace* the Biblical saying that the poor will always be with us). Past economic growth was extensive – with output growing in line with (modest) population growth (Reynolds 1983). As pre-industrial economies relied on organic raw materials for food, clothing, housing and fuel (energy), whose supply in the long run was inevitably constrained by the fixed factor, land, their growth was ultimately bounded by the productivity of land. In these organic economies (Wrigley 1988),

with diminishing returns to land conjoined with the Malthusian principle of population, a long-run stationary state where the mass of the people languished at a subsistence standard of living seemed inevitable. No wonder the classical economists were so gloomy!

But even in organic economies there could be some respite, through the adoption of market 'capitalism' and free trade defended by Adam Smith. This could generate some intensive growth as it would increase the productivity of the economy as compared with mercantilism, and by lowering the cost of the consumption bundle (through cheaper imports) would lead to a rise in per capita income. But if this growth in popular opulence led to excessive breeding the land constraint would inexorably lead back to subsistence wages. Technical progress could hold the stationary state at bay but the land constraint would ultimately prove binding.

The Industrial Revolution led to the substitution of this organic economy by a mineral-based energy economy. It escaped from the land constraint by using mineral raw materials instead of the organic products of land. Coal was the most notable, providing most of the heat energy of industry and with the development of the steam engine virtually unlimited supplies of mechanical energy. Intensive growth now became possible, as the land constraint on the raw materials required for raising aggregate output was removed.

Thus the Industrial Revolution in England was based on two forms of 'capitalism', one institutional, namely that defended by Adam Smith (because of its productivity-enhancing effects, even in an organic economy) and the other physical: the capital stock of stored energy represented by the fossil fuels which allows human-kind to banish mass structural poverty if it wishes. The Greens are, of course, against both forms of 'capitalism' – the free trade promoted by Smith, as well as the continued burning of fossil fuels – leaving little hope for the world's poor.

The Green movement (at least in its deep version) is best seen as the latest manifestation of the various secular religions in the West once the Christian God died for so many with the Scientific and Darwinian revolutions.

It would take us too far afield to substantiate this argument in any detail but since Augustine's 'City of God', the West has been haunted by its cosmology. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> from the Enlightenment to Marxism to Freudianism to Eco-fundamentalism Augustine's vision of the Heavenly City has had a tenacious hold on the Western mind. The same narrative with a Garden of Eden, a Fall leading to original Sin and a Day of Judgement for the Elect and Hell for the Damned keeps recurring. Thus the *philosophes* displaced the Garden of Eden by classical Greece and Rome, and God became an abstract cause – the Divine Watchmaker. The Christian centuries were the Fall, and the Christian revelations a fraud as God expressed his purpose through his laws recorded in the Great Book of Nature. The Enlightened were the elect and the Christian paradise was replaced by Posterity (see Becker 1932). By this updating of the Christian narrative, the eighteenth-century philosophers of the Enlightenment thought they had

been able to salvage a basis for morality and social order in the world of the Divine Watchmaker. But once as a result of Darwin he was seen to be blind, as Nietzsche proclaimed from the housetops at the end of the nineteenth century, God was Dead, and the moral foundations of the West were thereafter in ruins.

The subsequent attempts to found a morality based on reason are open to Nietzsche's fatal objection in his aphorism about utilitarianism: 'moral sensibilities are nowadays at such cross purposes that to one man a morality is proved by its utility, while to another its utility refutes it' (Nietzsche 1881/1982: 220).<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche's greatness lies in clearly seeing the moral abyss that the death of its God had created for the West. Kant's attempt to ground a rational morality on his principle of universalizability – harking back to the Biblical injunction 'therefore all things whatsoever ye do would that men should do to you, do even so to them' – founders on Hegel's two objections: it is merely a principle of logical consistency without any specific moral content, and worse, it is as a result powerless to prevent any immoral conduct that takes our fancy. The subsequent ink spilt by moral philosophers has merely clothed their particular prejudices in rational form.

The death of the Christian God did not, however, end variations on the theme of Augustine's 'City'. It was to go through two further mutations in the form of Marxism and Freudianism, and the most recent and bizarre mutation in the form of Ecofundamentalism. As both Marxism (in its postmodern form) and Ecofundamentalism provide the ballast for ecological imperialism it is worth noting their secular transformations of Augustine's Heavenly City.<sup>5</sup>

*Marxism*, like the old faith, looks to the past and the future. There is a Garden of Eden – before 'property' relations corrupted 'natural man'. Then the Fall as 'commodification' leads to class societies and a continuing but impersonal conflict of material forces, which leads in turn to the Day of Judgement with the Revolution and the millennial Paradise of Communism. This movement towards earthly salvation being mediated, not as the Enlightenment sages had claimed through enlightenment and the preaching of good will, but by the inexorable forces of historical materialism. Another secular 'city of God' has been created.

*Ecofundamentalism* is the latest of these secular mutations of Augustine's 'City of God' (Lal 1995). It carries the Christian notion of *contemptus mundi* to its logical conclusion. Humankind is evil and only by living in harmony with a deified Nature can it be saved (see Bramwell 1989). The guilt evinced against sinning against God has been replaced by that of sinning against Nature. Saving Space-ship Earth has replaced the saving of souls!

But why should the rest of the world subscribe to this continuing Augustinian narrative cloaked in different secular guises? It brings back to Asian minds the age-old attempt to impose Christianity on them under the cover of extra-territoriality, for which the modern equivalent is the 'conditionality' attached to the loans from the international financial agencies.

**(e) Democracy and development**

It has also become a *mantra* of Western – in particular US – political scientists, which has now been taken up by the international financial agencies, that democracy is required to protect the individual property rights, essential for economic development. But one just has to think of the shining example of colonial Hong Kong to realize that all good things do not in fact need to go together. For, even without any political liberty, the civil and economic liberties assured by the colonial government was sufficient to launch this 'rock' on its spectacular post-war development path. In fact in my book (with Hal-Myint) synthesizing the post-war development experience of twenty-five developing countries (Lal and Myint 1996), we found no relationship between the form of government and economic performance, despite the highly suspect statistical findings of numerous cross-sectional regression studies which claim to have found such a relationship. If democracy is to be preferred as a form of government it is not because of its instrumental value in promoting prosperity – at times it may well not – but because it promotes a different Western value: liberty. Again, many civilizations have placed social order above this value, and again it would be imperialistic for the West to ask them to change their ways.

Nor is democracy likely to be an inevitable by-product of development, as many hope – in particular with reference to China. I argued in *Unintended Consequences* that the politics of the ancient civilizations were determined largely by their ecological – geographical – environment in which their high cultures were formed. These have given rise to ancient political habits which provide legitimacy and resilience to differing political forms in different regions. Two examples will have to suffice.

Thus, Chinese civilization developed in the compact Yellow river valley, constantly threatened by the nomadic barbarians from the steppes to the north. To cope with this continual threat to its existence, China developed a tightly controlled bureaucratic authoritarianism as its distinctive polity which has continued for millennia to our day. It is unlikely to change unless the Chinese cease being Chinese.

By contrast, Hindu civilization developed in the vast Indo-Gangetic plain, protected to a greater extent by the Himalayas from the predation of barbarians to the north. As I argued in *The Hindu Equilibrium*, this geographical feature (together with the need to tie down the then scarce labour to land)<sup>6</sup> accounts for the traditional Indian polity which was notable for its endemic political instability among numerous feuding monarchies, and its distinctive social system embodied in the institution of caste. The latter by making war the trade of professionals saved the mass of the population from being inducted into the deadly disputes of its changing rulers. Whilst the tradition of paying a certain customary share of the village output as revenue to the current overlord, meant that any victor had little incentive to disturb the daily business of its newly acquired subjects. The

democratic practices gradually introduced by the British Raj have fitted these ancient habits like a glove. The ballot box has replaced the battlefield for the hurly-burly of continuing 'aristocratic' conflict, while the populace accepts with a weary resignation that its rulers will, through various forms of 'rent-seeking', take a certain share of output to feather their own nests.

If no universal claims for cherished Western cosmological beliefs are valid, it is unlikely that they will be found acceptable by the Rest. If the West ties its moral crusade too closely to the emerging processes of globalization, there is a danger that there will also be a backlash against the process of globalization. This potential cultural imperialism poses a greater danger to the acceptance of the new LEO in developing countries than the unfounded fears of their cultural nationalists that the modernization promoted by globalization will lead to the erosion of cherished national cultures (see Lal 1998, 1999b).

Equally, now that the US since 11 September seems to have accepted that it has to maintain a global PAX as the only superpower in the world, it is also imperative for this task that it does not seek to impose its 'habits of the heart'. In this task of maintaining a global PAX its interests coincide with those of the major Asian powers, India and China. Since the recent reversal of their inward-looking policies, both countries are now status quo powers which are keen to adopt the material beliefs of the West as they see they breed prosperity. But they will resist any imposition of Western 'habits of the heart'. The danger here is that, even though the US now sees the utility of various multilateral institutions like the UN Security Council in maintaining a form of indirect imperialism – much favoured by the British during their hegemony – they will also be tempted, goaded by domestic public opinion, to institute a new form of extra-territoriality.

#### (f) 'Human rights' and extra-territoriality

There is an important strand of moral imperialism with great resonance in domestic Western opinion which seeks to resurrect a form of extra-territoriality in the name of 'human rights'. The various tribunals set up for Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo and the arrest of General Pinochet are symptomatic of this trend. Even in the West, the moral theory justifying 'human rights' remains elusive. They are the modern variant of 'natural rights' (see Minogue 1978, 1979). But at no time has it been generally agreed even within the Western moral tradition that there *are* any such natural rights.

In clarifying the issues it is useful to make a distinction between specific and general rights. For a right is a normative resource which an individual either has or is given and which entitles him 'to limit the freedom of another person and for determining how he should act' (Hart 1955: 60). The claim that human rights exist is therefore based on the assumption that being *human* in some sense provides a moral justification for certain rights. These rights are moral or *general* rights, to



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be distinguished from the *specific* rights associated, for instance, with special legal or social systems or with those which arise when promises are made.

That there is nothing logically necessary about the existence of 'general' rights is borne out by their repudiation by some Western moral codes, for instance the utilitarian. As Jeremy Bentham stated, 'right is the child of law; from real laws come real rights. . . . Natural rights is simply nonsense on stilts'.

But, it has been claimed, not least by Amartya Sen in his recent book *Development as Freedom* that all civilizations (including the Chinese) have accepted human rights. But this is patently false (see Lal 2000b). Thus, as Rosemont (1998) rightly points out, within the Confucian tradition:

rights-talk was not spoken, and within which I am not a free, autonomous individual. I am a son, husband, father, grandfather, neighbor, colleague, student, teacher, citizen, friend. I have a very large number of relational obligations and responsibilities, which severely constrain what I do. These responsibilities occasionally frustrate or annoy, they more often are satisfying and they are always binding. . . . And my individuality, if anyone wishes to keep the concept, will come from the specific actions I take in meeting my relational responsibilities.

As he rightly notes, the attempt to reconcile a different 'way to live' with the universal claims of Christianity has been a constant factor in the West's encounter with China, with those who thought the Chinese way was incompatible with universal Christian beliefs seeking conversion, while others – of a less imperialist bent – seeking to find ways of making Chinese beliefs fit the universal Christian ethic. But there is no Universal moral law.

Civilizations with very different cosmological beliefs will not readily accept that a particular Western ethical predilection has any universal validity. True, many countries in the aftermath of the Holocaust signed the UN Convention on Human Rights, but as this is now being used as a battering ram by the West to force its own cosmological beliefs on the Rest, some leaders in Asia are beginning to think about walking away from this convention. Certainly the Chinese made their displeasure clear when they saw that this pretext was being used to abrogate the sovereignty of Serbia and in effect to abrogate the treaty of Westphalia which ended Europe's wars of religion. Here is another fault line reminiscent of Asia's past experience with Western domination. It will, I believe, be fiercely resisted, and will – at the least – sour relations with Asia as much as the similar conflict did in the age of conquest. It might even lead to a backlash against globalization if, like free trade in the past, it comes to be linked with new variants of Christianity and extra-territoriality.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

My conclusions will be brief. In its modern encounter with 'Asia', the West has sought to change these ancient civilizations in its own image. The Asians,



beginning with Japan, but now including most other countries in the region, have seen the utility of adopting the material beliefs of the West – not least as this provides the means to resist any future military aggression. But they have resisted attempts to change their cosmological beliefs, and continue to do so. In his conclusions, Panikkar rightly foresaw this when he wrote: 'though the influence of Europe and the penetration of new ideas have introduced vast changes in Asia, and may lead to even greater changes, Asian civilizations will continue to develop their marked individuality and remain spiritually and intellectually separate from Christian Europe' (p. 506).

The current moral crusades in the name of the environment and human rights are, as I have attempted to show, part of an old story of the encounter between Asia and the West. They will be resisted, as those in the past. But meanwhile they have the potential of causing grave disorder and setting back the world-wide victory of the West's material beliefs, whose acceptance promises to abolish the ancient scourge of mass poverty in the bulk of Asia. Hence, for the West, the best advice would be to follow that espoused by Queen Elizabeth I when her kingdom was torn by religious disputations, when she said she 'would not seek to make windows into men's souls'.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Even the other non-casteist sects which have since arisen in India like the Sikhs, have in the personal domain adopted many of the casteist features of Hinduism. This is also true of the converts to the monotheistic religions of Islam and Christianity. See Lal (1988).
- 2 This, I should emphasize, is a positive not a normative statement!
- 3 See Lal (1998).
- 4 A point only reiterated by reading the contributions in the edited volume by Sen and Williams (2000).
- 5 That Freudianism follows the same narrative is argued by Gellner (1993) and Webster (1995).
- 6 A common problem faced by all the ancient agrarian civilizations and which explains various institutions that were developed to deal with it: tenant serfdom in China, manorial feudalism in Europe, the caste system in India, slavery in the New World, for instance.

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