

Sustaining the World: Against Religious Maniacs and a Selfish Superpower?

Arnis Vilks

Department of Microeconomics and Information Systems,
Leipzig Graduate School of Management, GER

I argue that the current escalation of violence between the US-led West and the Muslim world bears the grave risk of extreme disasters - including nuclear conflicts. To counteract these risks, scholars in all parts of the world ought to use their knowledge, institutions, and networks to deepen the dialogue among the ‘clashing’ civilizations. As a contribution to this dialogue, I argue that the world-views of Western elites very often rest on two outdated philosophical and economic tenets – the legacies of Logical Positivism, and Economic Liberalism, respectively. Positivism has generated a widespread contempt for ethics and religion, while Liberalism accounts for the view that ‘free markets’ ensure an optimal allocation of the world’s riches. I argue that unless ethics gets rehabilitated among scholars in the West, its political leaders are likely to continue with international policies characterized by selfishness and disrespect for others.

1. Our final century?

The Physicist Martin Rees (2003) has argued forcefully that humankind might easily eradicate itself during this century. He estimates the odds that this might happen to be no better than 50:50. One of the main risks is that the unhampered technological progress may soon produce and make easily available the germs, the nuclear, or more “innovative” weapons which – by sheer error or by malign intent – can destroy and make uninhabitable large parts of the world.

In fact, the likelihood of “megaterrorism” by extremists from the Muslim world seems to be rather multiplied by the policies that the US-led West has pursued since 9/11. While the invasion of Afghanistan to topple the Taliban regime was seen as inappropriate only by few in the West, it gave rise to massive protests in many parts of the Muslim world. Much more so did the invasion of Iraq – which was not only opposed by major Western allies of the US, but has caused protests, anti-Bush, and anti-Blair campaigns throughout the world. Even before the Iraq war, it had to be expected that at least as many innocent Iraqis would be dying from Western bombs and bullets, as Americans died on 9/11. Moreover, one could predict almost with certainty that more Muslims would be drawn into fanaticism, and the already fanatical ones would turn into terrorists in greater numbers than before.

The terrorist attacks in Bali, Madrid, and London that followed the invasion of Iraq provided sad confirmation for that expectation. That the primary targets were Australians, Spaniards, and Brits - rather than Germans or Frenchmen - indicates that these terrorist attacks were indeed triggered by the Iraq war, and might not have occurred without it.

Now, with Iran denying Israel the right to exist, the Bush administration accusing Iran to strive for the atomic bomb, and the view being discussed that this

may require the pre-emptive use of tactical nuclear weapons (Hersh, 2006), the risk of even further escalation seems to increase. A so-called 'dirty' nuclear bomb - detonated in, say, New York or Washington again - cannot be regarded as unlikely, and could easily trigger vengeful reaction by the Bush administration. Pakistan, which already has nuclear weapons, and an illiteracy rate of more than 50%, can hardly be viewed as a politically stable ally of the West.

Sustaining the world seems to require every attempt to try and counteract the confrontation among Islam and the West.

2. What can we do?

It is obvious that most of us have only indirect means of diminishing the probability of further violence between 'the West and the rest', to use Huntington's (1997) phrase. But indirect means we do have.

We live in a 'global village'. We easily travel from Europe to Australia, from America to Asia, and back again. What is said and written in Washington, London, or Sydney - is heard in Marrakech, Tehran, and Cairo. Not only an invasion of Iraq by a huge US army, but even caricatures in a Danish newspaper can trigger violent demonstrations in places as far away as Jakarta or Islamabad.

Less spectacular, but, no less important is what John Maynard Keynes (1973:383) called the 'gradual encroachment of ideas':

"... the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back ..."

In fact, one can take it for granted that what is discussed and said in conferences like this one, what is written in books and journals, what is taught today in universities and business schools - is not only influencing the world-views of tomorrow's leaders of the Western world, but it is also noticed by Muslim scholars, and it will thus shape the West's image among future Muslim generations.

Thus, if there is any hope of gradually reducing the confrontation between Islam and the West, we need to discuss the issues that cause confrontation and hatred. We need to discuss them with Muslim colleagues and scholars, but also among ourselves.

3. What went wrong?

This is the question asked by the American Islam scholar Bernard Lewis. He explains in careful historical detail that "for many centuries the world of Islam was at the forefront of human civilization and achievement" (Lewis, 2002:3), but has clearly lost that status to the West - in military terms as well as in science, technology, commerce, and in terms of material prosperity. Today, the Western world produces and consumes about 50% (20 trillion USD in 2004) of the world's annual gross product, the Muslim world (the members of the Organization

of Islamic Countries) with about twice the population produces and consumes just 5% (2 trillion USD in 2004). Extreme poverty, hunger and illiteracy are rather rare in the West, while they govern large parts of the Muslim world.

But it is not just this inequality that breeds hatred of the West. In the age of the Internet, it is known around the globe that the repeatedly made promise by the rich Western countries to increase official development aid (ODA) for the poor to 0.7 % of GDP has been ignored for decades by most of the Western governments. In the case of the US, the official alms share to the poor has more or less continuously fallen from its peak post-WWII level of almost 3% to a mere 0.15% of GDP in 2004. With 20.000 people perishing every day from extreme poverty, this is plainly not consistent with the compassion demanded by Islam, Christianity or any other somewhat compassionate religion or system of ethics. One can hardly disagree with Jeffrey Sachs (2005:288) that this behaviour of the West is tantamount “to announce brazenly to a large part of the world, ‘you count for nothing’”. In the age of the Internet, this announcement is heard and understood around the globe.

The connection between poverty and illiteracy on the one hand, and terrorism on the other hand, has often been doubted by pointing out that the terrorists themselves are often neither poor nor illiterate. But again, one must agree with Sachs (2005:330): “Whether terrorists are rich or poor or middle class, their staging areas ... are unstable societies beset by poverty, unemployment, rapid population growth, hunger, and lack of hope.”

It seems very likely that the world would be a much better and safer place, if the powerful West had taken the Millennium Development Goals seriously, and if Western leaders would have explained to their constituencies that it is a matter of enlightened self-interest to eradicate poverty and illiteracy.

Instead, the US-led West is continuing to act, as if the pursuit of happiness would be an unalienable right not for all men and women, but only for our kin.

4. The world-view of today’s Western leaders

Some see the ‘clash’ as the confrontation of two religions – Christianity and Islam. However, if one reads bin Laden’s ‘letter to the American people’ of November 2002, or Ahmadi-Nejad’s more recent letter to the US president, it is quite clear that neither of them are attacking Christianity as such – on the contrary, the name of Jesus is always followed by the respectful phrase “pbuh”. And although the US president seems to listen to people who think and say that Islam is “an evil and wicked religion”, Bush himself has often described mainstream Islam as “peaceful”.

Clearly, the main religion of the Western civilization is Christianity, but the role of Religion is quite different here from what it is in most parts of the Muslim world. Particularly among the Western elites, many consider religion *as such* to be old-fashioned, superstitious nonsense. To be sure, in the Bush administration there are many who consider themselves devout Christians, but for many, religion remains a matter for Sunday prayer, and has little to inform professional life.

Professional life is rather governed by an attitude that is characterized by such epithets as “realistic”, “no-nonsense”, “sober-minded”, “down-to-earth”, “objective”, “facts-based”, or just “professional”.

Of course, there is the other side of the dichotomy. What is “unprofessional”, “nebulous”, “unrealistic”, or “subjective”, is not banned outright – one is free to have opinions, and to spend one’s spare time with all sorts of diversions, but what is unprofessional is by definition not suitable for the workplace.

Although things begin to shift slowly, and business ethics, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and sustainability enter the curricula of more and more business schools, these are topics which are typically categorized as “subjective” or “nebulous” by the currently ruling generation of “sober-minded, down-to-earth professionals”.

This attitude is not too difficult to explain. Western academia of the 1950s and 60s, where the older ones of today’s political and business leaders formed their world views, was deeply shaped by the philosophy of Logical Positivism that originated in the Vienna Circle in the 1920s. This philosophy was an attempt to establish a ‘scientific world-view’, and to ban everything from this *weltanschauung* that was only pseudo-scientific, or metaphysical. The influence of this renewed Positivism can hardly be exaggerated. It was regarded as the “received view” of scientific theories until the 1970s (Suppe, 1974). In a jargon that has become quite standard among Western academics, the basic tenet of Logical Positivism can be expressed as “all knowledge is either empirical or analytical”. The empirical is identified with the observable, and the analytical with linguistic or mathematical convention. The important thing is that every kind of discourse that is neither empirical nor mathematical, was regarded as, strictly speaking, nonsense.

Arguably, neither religion, nor art, nor ethics can be deduced from observation plus mathematics. For the CEO or political leader, the implication is that ethics, CSR, and religion may be a matter for the PR or communications department, but that they have no place in a strategy meeting.

In a somewhat similar way, today’s Western elites have come to believe in “free markets”. They were educated at a time when economists only gradually mastered the mathematics required to analyse multi-market interaction. Not many economists at that time understood Debreu’s (1959) mathematical reformulation of Adam Smith’s claim that ‘the invisible hand’ of the market turns private vice into public virtue. Today’s leaders of the West were brought up to believe that a system of perfectly competitive markets would ensure a socially optimal allocation of goods. Today’s economic neo-liberalism can only be attributed to a somewhat naïve reading of some theorems in mathematical economics which were proved in the 1950s – but not well understood even by an average professor of Economics at that time.

As it happens, the ‘invisible hand’ thesis combines very well with Logical Positivism in creating and supporting an attitude of selfishness. Laissez-faire liberalism allows one to ignore how one’s decisions will affect others, and reduces ethics to the maxim: Do what maximizes your material wealth – competition and the markets will ensure that the global allocation resulting from selfish behaviour will nevertheless be socially optimal (cf. Kelly, 2002).

It is small wonder that the egocentric and selfish world-view generated by Positivism and Economic Liberalism translates into world politics as frequent disrespect for the concerns of other countries’ inhabitants. It is the ‘national interest’ that counts, not concern for others.

5. What Western leaders need to learn

The simple fact is that within the respective scientific communities of philosophers, and economists, respectively, neither Logical Empiricism nor the invisible hand thesis have survived criticism. Today, after Thomas Kuhn (1962) and Paul Feyerabend (1975), Ethics, Metaphysics, and Religion should be just as respectable fields of enquiry and scholarship as quantum mechanics, cosmology or string theory in physics.

And well-trained economists today understand clearly that there are many problems that free markets cannot solve even in a highly stylized hypothetical model of 'perfect competition'. The notion of 'social optimum' was eventually replaced by 'efficiency' (Arrow and Hahn, 1971), and there is a huge literature on market failure. Moreover, the perfect competition paradigm is being gradually replaced by Game Theory, which treats cooperation as no less important than competition (cf. Nalebuff and Brandenburger, 1996).

Maybe we cannot update the world-views of current Western leaders' - but at least we can hope that the next generation will take over soon, and be better prepared to sustain the world.

References

- Arrow, K., and Hahn, F. (1971). *General Competitive Analysis*, Amsterdam: North-Holland, ISBN 0444854975.
- Debreu, G. (1959). *Theory of Value. An Axiomatic Analysis*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, ISBN 0300015593.
- Feyerabend, P. (1975), *Against Method*. London: New Left Books, ISBN: 0860916464.
- Huntington, S. (1997). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of world Order*. London: Schuster & Schuster, ISBN 074323149X.
- Kelly, M. (2002). "Reflections on Adam Smith's 'The Wealth of Nations' and its Effect on our Contemporary World," *International Journal of Management Literature*. ISSN 0972-4079, 2,1&2: 81-92.
- Keynes, J.M. (1973). *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, SBN 333009428.
- Kuhn, T. S. (1970). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, ISBN 0226458040.
- Lewis, B. (2002). *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*. London: Phoenix, ISBN 075381675X.
- Lewis, B. (2004). *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*. London: Phoenix, ISBN 0753817527.
- Nalebuff, B., and Brandenburger, A. (1996). *Co-opetition*. London: HarperCollinsBusiness, ISBN 0006387241.
- Rees, M. (2003). *Our Final Century: A Scientist's Warning: How Terror, Error, and Environmental Disaster Threaten Humankind's Future in This Century*. Arrow, ISBN: 0099436868.
- Suppe, F. (1974). "The Search for Philosophic Understanding of Scientific Theories," in F. Suppe (ed.), *The Structure of Scientific Theories*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, ISBN 0252006348, pp. 3-232.

Arnis Vilks, born in 1956, studied Economics, Philosophy, Mathematics, and Political Science at the University of Hamburg, where he earned a doctoral degree in Economics in 1983. He has held various teaching and research positions in Hamburg, Cologne, Cambridge (UK), Riga, Stanford, and Hamilton (NZ). Since 1995

he is a Professor of Economics at Germany's oldest Business School, HHL (Leipzig Graduate School of Management), where he served as Dean from 2000 to 2005. His research focuses on philosophical and logical issues in economics and management, in particular formal logic approaches to game theory, the notions of rationality, utility, and happiness, and the *weltanschauung* of the Western world, its roots and effects in the global economy.