ISLAM AND THE WEST: WORLDS APART? 
A CASE OF INTERACTIVE SOCIOCULTURAL DYNAMICS 

BY 
C.A.O. VAN NIEUWENHUIJZE 

In many parts of the world encounter situations occur in which one party identifies as Muslim, and the other, for want of a clear countervailing label, will opt for a code name such as «Western». For purpose of mutual understanding the notions «Islam» and «the West» raise more problems than they solve¹.

Cultural encounter—indeed encounter between any sociocultural entities—is, fundamentally, an anomaly. The natural expression of self-awareness in terms of universality is impeded by the manifest presence of sociocultural entities other than «self». The sense of universality is exposed as a wishful claim to uniqueness, forcing with withdrawal to a self-defensive postulate of exclusiveness, by way of grudging accommodation to the manifest plurality of entities. Its conceptual instrumentation is reciprocally determinant distinctness. This connotes the implicit recognition that the sociocultural entity concerned is an open system in interaction with other systems. They are relevant to one another in a contradistinctive manner. Identity and interaction are concomitant phenomena; there is no primacy of the one over the other. At issue is the instrumentation of contradistinctiveness. This is bound to be partial and incidental, i.e., eclectically representative according to circumstances.

Settings and historical vicissitudes as determinants of the modalities of intercultural encounter

The spatiotemporal setting of an encounter will condition its modalities. It will at once reflect and predetermine certain general

matters, such as balance of power, and particular matters, such as specific issues surfacing. The contrast between Andalusia and the Crusades, or that between the mandates and the current Muslim immigration into Europe, is to a large extent a matter of situation of the encounter: who imposes his presence upon whom, and how.

The same applies analogically when no single physical locale is manifest and the means of communication, whether printed, auditive or visual, is its substitute. In this case natural ipso/ethnocentrism has free play. Actual encounter is prefigured in a posture of self-assertion and self-reinforcement confronting an anticipated «other». The ominous prospect opens up of the medium—that is, those controlling it—becoming the massage.

The importance of settings is borne out by the multiplicity of manifestations of either cultural tradition. Initially each has had to come to terms with a pre-existent civilization. On top of this there is the historical diffraction into multiple temporal and regional manifestations. Western civilization features in distinct American, West- and East-European manifestations, to mention only these. Islamic civilization, though more readily traceable to a single source, appears in distinct manifestations which, save common identification in important respects, reflect separate encounter situations. The inner dynamics, and the problems arising are related to the factors at play in specific settings. In this perspective, encounters between Islam and the West are on a par with encounters between either and third parties.

The significance of settings is further attested by the fact that currently there is a notable presence of Muslims in the West and of Westerners in the lands of Islam. In the immediacy of the encounter, their self-identifications as «Muslim» and «Western» acquire practical consequences and hence induce inspection. More so as either will feature in the encounter in a way somehow expressing awareness of the presence of the other.

The cases are hardly symmetrical. As stated, the Western impact in Central Asia is unlike that in Indonesia, and this differs from that in the several parts of the Indian Subcontinent or those of West-Africa. The net significance of these diverse Western presences depends mainly on the way they are taken into account by those hosting them. Besides, the position and influence of Westerners in the lands of Islam are losing their gradually imposed self-evidence. They are becoming more subdued, and subject to