

Wendy M. Sargent
Civilizing Peace Building : Twenty-first Century Global Politics
(Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007, 258pp.)

Wendy Sargent's useful book, structured around the theme of the dialogue of civilizations, would have been clearer if civilization had been used as a noun rather than civilizing in the title as a verb. Her thesis is that the civilizational peacebuilding approach can make a significant contribution to the field of international peace building. Civilizing as a verb has a double sense in Sargent's work. The first is a growing awareness of civilizations as a basic unit of study as in Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" or in the 2001 UN effort of Dialogue of Civilizations. Civilizations in this sense are plural, and they need to talk to each other to help prevent conflicts by reducing misunderstandings and mistrust and by laying the foundation for a non-violent resolution of controversies. The dialogue of civilizations is based on a celebration of cultural diversity and an acceptance of each civilization as an equally valid approach to life — what was once called "cultural relativity" by the US cultural anthropologists such as Franz Boaz. The hope is that once knowledge takes the place of pre-conceived opinions, stereotypes and prejudices about others, other civilizations will be perceived less as a threat than as a benefit.

As Sargent points out "Synergy between civilizations is important. Modern society can benefit from traditional wisdom in regards to balance and nature. Modern civilizations can contribute the culture of constant questioning and seeking for new understandings. Modern contributions encourage liberation from cultural stagnation and unthinking traditions that cause pain and suffering to individuals or society. Examples are changes encouraged by feminism that aims to liberate women to make their own choices in areas traditionally governed by their husband or male elders."

The 2001 UN-sponsored Year of Dialogue of Civilizations was first proposed by then President of Iran M. Khatami in 1998. Since few can oppose dialogue, the UN voted to sponsor the year and to encourage UNESCO and the UN University to hold seminars and workshops on the theme. The UN General Assembly also held a high-level debate on 8-9 November 2001. Since the results of the 11 September 2001 attack on the World Trade Center were highly visible in New York City, the debate took the safe path of being for tolerance, democracy and the rule of law. Khatami's period as president of Iran ended shortly afterwards, and there has been no follow up by Iran's present leaders. No other state has taken on the task, although there is still some interest among academics and non-governmental organizations.

There is a second sense to Sargent's use of the verb "civilizing" — that is, the process of creating a global, world civilization. Some people have stressed that there is (or should be) a global civilization based on a common set of values and global principles. Even Khatami hinted that this world civilization was the basic aim of the Dialogue of Civilizations. Khatami wrote in 1998 in his *Islam, Liberty and Development* "Why can't we transcend today to achieve a new vision, and in its shadow become the source of a new civilization which while resting on our historical identity, and benefiting from the accomplishments of modern civilization, could inaugurate a new chapter in human life."

The United Nations is both the symbol and the motor of this world civilization. Many of the UN resolutions and legal codes for the protection of human rights and economic justice

assume that a single world of moral discourse has come into existence. Human rights, in particular, are based on a desire to unify the world with a common framework for all governments and people. Human rights should be the parameters within which governments set their policies. As Sargent points out “The creation and strengthening of these shared foundations is central to those concerned to make international relations and peace building more effective in the future.”

While a good bit of the book is devoted to the analysis of international relations approaches such as realism, cosmopolitanism, and peace research, it is the emphasis on a world civilization that is the most useful for follow-up research. Readers may want to look at Pitirim Sorokin’s approach to civilizations as in his *Modern Social and Historical Philosophies* (1963). There is still a good deal of analysis needed to make the common world civilization rather than the individual state the chief focus of international relations.

Rene Wadlow



Drawing: Evgueni Bosyatski