

УДК 20:308

On Significance of Religion Factors in Forming Civilization Identities in Northeast Asia, West Asia and Europe

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Received 11.03.2013, received in revised form 18.03.2013, accepted 25.03.2013

This article considers the issue of factors that determined lower significance of religion in formation the civilization of the Northeast Asia vs. civilizations of Europe and West Asia. The weakness of political influence of religion in NorthEast Asia is related to specific features of Buddhism and profound ethnolinguistic heterogeneity of this region of the world.

Keywords: variability of content and uncertainty of volume of the notion “civilization”, political influence of religion, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, ethnolinguistic heterogeneity.

Introduction

The problems of civilization remain critical in the modern cultural and social studies. This is due to the fact that in the present-day world the interaction in economic and political domains is successful when it unites countries that are considerably close in respect of civilization. Examples are NATO (a military-political block), European Union (an above-state structure that has certain features of a federative state and potentially is being such), and the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (an above-state political structure carrying out basically consultative functions).

The notion of civilization bears a considerable share of uncertainty in terms of its scope and content. However, despite this circumstance, the analysis of publications undertaken by the author (following Huntington, 2003) infers that

there is a “reasonable agreement” on existence of 5 civilizations in the present-day world – Chinese, Japanese, Hindu, Islamist and Western. Enumeration of these names raises the question if there is a particular logical inconsistency or incorrectness in the fact that some of the civilizations are named by the religious indicator (Islamist, Hindu), while others (Japanese, Chinese) are named based on the ethnicity. Does not this constitute a mixture unities classified as civilizations that are indeed consolidated on the basis of different types – religious and ethnic?

And if there is no such incorrectness and these unities do appear as civilizations, then what could constitute the explanation for differences in religious and ethnic phenomena in their development? Among the 5 main civilizations two appeared in Northeast Asia (Chinese and Japanese), two – in West Asia (Islamist,

Hindu), and one – in Europe (Western). Often the Western civilization is referred to as the Christian civilization (specifically so in the past when its basics were founded). In other words, Northeast Asia developed civilizations that are least related to religion in their genesis. What features of the development of civilizations in Northeast Asia is this due to? Let us attempt to consider this issues without claiming, naturally, to be able to provide a comprehensive solution (the latter of the questions raised appears to have the most immediate significance to the presence conference), but in the expectation of a particular advance in their representation and analysis.

The notion of “civilization”

Let us depart from the first question. Can unities identified on the basis of ethnic attribute, as well as unities identified on the basis of religion be referred to as civilizations? In our view, yes, they can.

The notion “civilization” implies a group of countries that are consolidated and set apart by a **systemic** similarity, i.e. a similarity based on a complex of correlated indicators. In this respect, this is the notion of civilization by its content, e.g. from the notion of “confessional unity of countries”, which implies a group of countries united and identifiable under a single attribute – a religious one. Nevertheless, the notions that may be different by the **content** of the notion may coincide or virtually coincide in terms of their **volume**. In particular, the notion of the “country that traditionally practices Christianity”, although having confessional content, in terms of its volume coincides with the notion of “western civilization” that includes a multitude of various attributes.

The correlation of attributes-phenomena that motivate to think in the notion of their complex as a particular unity does not appear rigid. This means that in certain cases the notion of the

particular phenomenon (e.g. a confessional unity) as the integrator of a multitude of civilization phenomena may be higher or lower, depending on the case. In certain cases, the ethnic factor may step forward as such an integrator. Accordingly, the content of the notion of “civilization” carries certain variability. Similar variability was typical for notions reflecting social realia. The mechanisms forming the notions of variable contents and fuzzy scope were reviewed by the author in detail in previous publications (Popov, 2006).

Religion in the History of Europe

It is known that the contemporary Western civilization was formed in the early Medieval Age when the level of culture (in the broadest sense) of the peoples of Western and Eastern Europe acquired the new meaning. The importance of Christianity was high in the development of this new environment. It became the important intermediary between the semi-barbarian tribes (Germanic, Romanized Celtic and Slavonic tribes) and the ancient culture in its decline. Although literacy was penetrating to peoples of Western and Eastern Europe even before the spread of Christianity, it is quite evident that formation of written culture began in Christian monasteries. The church quickly grew into an influential social institution civil leaders had to cooperate with. The peoples of the Western and Eastern Europe beyond doubt had ethnic state self-consciousness, and there is no doubt that they had a strong religious self-consciousness – making them feel themselves not only Catholic or Orthodox in particular, but Christian in general. Wars of Medieval Europe were mainly conducted under the religious banners (Crusades against heretical movements, such as Albigenses in Europe).

In the Medieval age the church was the driving intellectual force of the Christian world,

and it was specifically in the realm of religious-philosophic activity (in Western Europe) when the decisive steps in the direction of contemporary science were made (for more details see Popov, 2010).

The turnaround to the New Time, with its different ideological and social guidelines, was also associated with the religious conflict (between Catholics and Protestants) sometimes being extremely fierce.

Attenuation of religious enthusiasm in the New Time, especially during the Age of Enlightenment, also caused the attenuation of the religion's political significance. Wars were now fought under the flag of national and state interests, sometimes along with the flag of chauvinism and racism. Alongside with that, at least starting from the late 19th century, the European philosophy turned its attention to civilization unities of countries. Many of these unities, including the European one, were formed under the influence of religion. Therefore, the growth of attention to civilization problems may, potentially, be related to the trend of religion strengthening in the present-day world, which is inconsistently combined with the trend of further secularization.

The notion of "civilization", as integrity of related, mentally close country states, has grown exactly on the basis of Europe. Military conflicts may occur at present time, which cause is to recollect the military-political situation of the medieval age – countries of one branch of the Western civilization acting together (not separately as in the colonial age) against the civilization-different countries, mainly Islamic countries.

Religion in the History of Western Asia

There are two unities in Western Asia that are referred to as civilizations: Islamist and Hindu. Islam appeared as a relation linked with

heritage of Judaism and Christianity, but also polemically directed at them. Religious self-identification in the Islamic world is traditionally strong, comparable to ethnic self-identification. In accordance with an Islamic tradition, all Muslims are a particular community. Islam is the religion that grants a powerful sanction to military, and therefore, political activity. Wars led by Islamic nations were traditionally perceived by them as having a religious side to them.

The processes of attenuation of the religious power in the Islamic world were generally weaker than in Europe. Starting from the second half of the 20th century, political influence of Islam has grown. For example, during the governing of Ataturk (1920-1930) the attitude of the state power authorities to Islam was negative. In the spirit of many countries, Ataturk relied on ethnic and state consciousness. It seemed that Turkey was experiencing secularization following the French type of the late 18th century and almost following the Soviet type, too. However, already under the governing of the nearest successors of Ataturk, the style of attitude to religion has changed, although the Turkish government did preserve the secular character. At present, a party of Islamic nature is at the power in Turkey, for the first time.

The relations of religion and policy in India were developing somewhat differently in certain respects. Although in India the traditional religion is closely related to self-consciousness of Indians as the super-ethnicity, Hinduism was less present on flags of warfare than Islam. This may be related to the unwarlike character of Indians as a nation. However, the ideas of non-violent resistant of Mahatma Gandhi had connections with local religious traditions. Inter-religious conflicts in India were less fierce than in Europe or in the Islamic world. Buddhism appeared in India in the 5-6 centuries BC, being a religion that is closely related to Hindu traditions, although

being somewhat polemical vs. Hindi. The increase followed by attenuation of the impact of Buddhism in India was less dramatic than the change of religions in Europe or the Islamic world. Mutual penetration of Hinduism and Buddhism reached a scale in ancient India when, according to opinions of present-day researchers, the difference between the two virtually eroded in perception of the regular believers (Kochetov, 1984). This reminds little of the relation of religions in Europe and Islamic world.

Religion in the History of Northeast Asia

At present, the following territories are a considered part of this region of the world: Asian part of Russia, Mongolia, China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, and Taiwan. The Asian part of Russia and particular areas of Western China carry religious heritage related to other regions of the world (Europe and West Asia). In South Korea Christianity became one of the major religions in the 20th century. In the course of further consideration, as we refer to religious history of Northeast Asia, we will consider Mongolia, China, Korea and Japan, in their traditional state, approximately till the end of the 19th century, so that to reflect the specific feature of religious traditions of this region of the world.

Political significance of religion (especially in case of the religion not being the unique feature of the country, as Shintoism for Japan) was considerably lower here than in Europe or in Western Asia. Conquests (e.g. of Mongols) were not under the religious flags (on the contrary to the conquests by the Arabs); religious differences between the countries did not cause clashes comparable in size to religious wars in Europe in the Medieval Ages during the Reformation. Buddhism spreading in India was assimilating and including into its pantheon deities from other religious traditions. Beyond doubt, this is

related to features of Buddhism as an outlook, in particular, with polytheistic traditions inherited from Hinduism. Ethnic and state self-identification in Northeast Asia was traditionally stronger than confessional identification. Religious organizations, priest orders were never as powerful as in India, Islamic world or in Europe.

The specific feature of Northeast Asia, as opposed to Europe and Western Asia, in terms of civilization, is not only that it carries other civilizations, but also that the notion of civilization here, as a typological unity of countries, has a unique somewhat different sense. The meaning of religion as a notion integrating not only the ethnicity, but also the civilization, is lower here. The dominant features become factors of ethnolinguistic alliance and state belonging. Ethnolinguistic diversity of Northeast Asia is very large, considerably larger than in Europe, and comparable to that of Western Asia. By all appearance, profound ethnolinguistic dissociation of the region is the factor that prevents the transformation of the above-nation religion (provided that it is flexible enough – just the feature typical of Buddhism) in accordance with various local traditions.

Europe is clearly dominated by peoples of the Indo-European language family (Roman, Germanic, Slavonic languages). Western Asia is represented by large population of several language families – Hamito-Semitic, Indo-European, Dravidian. In Northeast Asia there are large peoples of Chinese-Tibetan, Altai, Indo-European language families. Meanwhile, the Altai language family is heterogeneous and is not recognized by all linguists (Languages of Asia and Africa, 1994); Korean and Japanese languages are especially separated, both from each other and other languages of the same family (ibid). Chinese-Tibetan languages have nothing in common with the Altai by origin.

It is probable that the success of integration in the economic domain achieved in Europe may be linked to considerable heterogeneity of this region of the world in a religious and ethnolinguistic respect (plus enormous effect of religion in this region in the medieval age, traces of which are noticeable in the present-day secularized culture). It has been observed (Arin, 2003) that apart from the European Union there are no considerable large international integration structures in the economic domain.

Alongside with that profound heterogeneity in the ethnolinguistic respect of such regions of the world as West Asia and Northeast Asia is seemingly a strong factor preventing the development of European-style integration processes in these regions. In certain parts of West Asia, however, ethnolinguistic heterogeneity is partly compensated by the religious homogeneity (e.g. a group of Islamic countries of Sunnite belief), given the traditionally high value of religion in politics. However in Northeast Asia in general, there is no religious heterogeneity and in cases when countries are bound by a specific religious unity (e.g. in Japan, China, Mongolia one of the major religions or the principal

religion is Buddhism), this circumstance is of smaller importance, since the political value of religion (especially above-national religion), is considerably weak in this part of the world. It is clear that economic and political integration of countries depends on numerous factors; but, at any rate, religious traditions in Northeast Asia do not promote the integration processes within this region of the world to the same extent as in Europe or West Asia. This is true for Eastern Asia in general, including Southeast Asia. The significance of religions here, in the majority of countries, is weak, but the value of the ethnolinguistic factors is high, however, they seem to divide Asia more than to unite it.

This circumstance, in our view, needs to be accounted for in the analysis of the integration prospects of Eastern Asia.

In this way, we may suppose that the formation of civilizations in Northeast Asia, the genesis of which will be more linked with ethnic (super-ethnic), rather than religious phenomena, is due to the two following circumstances: specific features of Buddhism, as an outlook, and the profound ethnolinguistic heterogeneity of this region of the world.

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**О значении религиозных факторов
в формировании цивилизационных идентичностей
в Северо-Восточной Азии,
Западной Азии и Европе**

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В статье рассматривается вопрос о факторах формирования в Северо-Восточной Азии цивилизаций, имеющих в их генезисе более слабые связи с религиозными явлениями в сравнении с цивилизациями Европы и Западной Азии. Слабость политического влияния религии в Северо-Восточной Азии связывается с особенностями буддизма и глубокой этнолингвистической разнородностью этого региона мира.

Ключевые слова: вариативность содержания и нечеткость объема понятия «цивилизация», политическое значение религии, буддизм, христианство, ислам, этнолингвистическая разнородность.
