

## Migrating Texts II: Introduction and Summary of Session

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In 1947 at the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference of UNESCO held in Mexico City, Jacques Maritain posed a perplexing question. The problem he was facing was that of achieving an international consensus on a list of fundamental human rights. Maritain was dealing with a political body that was comprised of representatives with diverse beliefs, faiths, cultures and histories. In his address to his audience, Maritain asked the following:

How is an agreement conceivable among men assembled for the purpose of jointly accomplishing a task dealing with the future of the mind, who come from the four corners of the earth and who belong not only to different cultures and civilizations, but to different spiritual families and opposing schools of thought? <sup>1</sup>

In light of current events that are marked by military conflicts fueled by both secular and religious fundamentalist ideologies, Maritain's question is still pertinent. Amongst political commentators there is much talk of a divisions between Western and Non-western civilizations. It is often argued that certain kinds of group differences entail conceptual and moral incommensurability – a condition that would make agreement virtually impossible. In the face of what at times appear as incommensurable cultures and civilizations, Maritain was looking for common ground upon which groups of different faiths might stand.

This symposium's theme, "Migrating Texts and Traditions in Philosophy", is particularly timely because it brings to light an area of scholarship that traverses such common ground and in doing so dispels the myth of incommensurable civilizations. It is all too often the case that political conflicts are explained in terms that reduce the complex relationships that exist between states, cultures, religions, individuals, and ideas, to a simple opposition of "us" and "them". For example, the alleged incommensurability between Western and Islamic cultures is a popular topic in news media. From the claim that the "Islamic world" and the "Western world" are incommensurable, it is sometimes inferred that democracy and human rights are only applicable to "Western" states – that is to say, such ideas are culturally specific and not universally applicable.

Some of the moral and epistemic relativists who hold such a view do so with the intention of respecting and possibly preserving cultural traditions. However, the incommensurability thesis considers cultures and civilizations to be comprehensive, self-contained and self-sufficient units. In times of conflict this might seem to be the case. When opposing sides "dig in" by moving towards extreme and fundamentalist expressions of ideas, it can be hard to find common ground. But, as we shall see in the papers to follow, there is evidence that suggests there has been and always will be the possibility of intercultural exchanges of ideas.

David Lea presents a comparative study of Islamic and Western texts that makes connections between some key principles of the Enlightenment and pre-Enlightenment

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State*. (London: Hollis and Carter, 1954) 70.

Andalusian texts. Lea argues that we can find the following Enlightenment principles in the texts of Islamic scholars that predate modernity:

1) the idea that reason is not merely a servant of religion,

2) reason is autonomous, i.e., it is self-sufficient and self ruled,

3) reason as well as religion can yield universal truths.

Aside from its own merit as a scholarly work, Lea's study is an invitation to look beyond the familiar links between Greek and early Christian thought and modernity, in order to see the ways that ideas can migrate through cultural milieus.

Leslie Armour continues in the realm of Islamic thought with his paper "Putting Islam

and the West Together Again: The Philosophy of M.M. Sharif". Armour brings to light an important philosopher whose work has been mostly overlooked by English speaking scholars. Through his exposition of Sharif's thought, Armour challenges the claim that there is a fundamental "clash" between Islamic and Christian thought.

Both Lea and Armour give convincing evidence of the dynamic and often surprising migration of ideas and in doing so show how common ground between diverse traditions can be established. So, one answer to Maritain's question is that agreement between individuals of diverse communities and faiths is at times unexpected and at others unacknowledged, but nevertheless, it is always possible.