

RADICALISM AND THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

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Abstract. The notion of a clash of civilizations has gained notoriety since the terrorist attack on WTC on 9/11. Professor Samuel P. Huntington has popularized the view that the coming global conflict will be among major civilizations, not among different political ideologies. He identifies eight major civilizations: the Western (Europe and North America), Slavic (Russia and Eastern Europe), Islamic, Confucian, Hindu, Japanese, Latin American, and the African. Of particular focus in the paper is the threat to civilization from radical Islam or Islamism. Three factors that foment radicalism are described: the Islamic theology of exclusiveness, the nostalgic memory of a Muslim empire that lasted nearly 1,000 years, and the consequences of oil boom in the Middle East. Population estimates for different civilizations are provided at the end.

Introduction

The theory of a clash of civilizations has been with us for some time. British historian Arnold Toynbee used the term in a series of lectures he delivered in 1953. The Middle East specialist Bernard Lewis wrote in 1990 that the Muslim rage against the West is “no less than a clash of civilizations” (Lewis, 1990, p 60). Samuel P. Huntington, a Harvard University political science professor, has given new currency to the notion of a clash of civilizations. His 1993 article in *Foreign Affairs* has gained global audience. A few years ago, I lectured to a political science class at Pondicherry University in Southern India. I was pleasantly surprised by the extent of the knowledge that Indian students had on this topic. A majority of the Indian students agreed with Huntington’s conclusion. The bipolar division of the world based on political ideology (communism versus liberalism) was no longer relevant. The world was entering a new period of intense conflict among civilizations. Writes Huntington,

It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of

civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future. (Huntington, 1993, P.22)

What is Civilization?

Civilization and culture are related concepts. A way of life is called a culture. A culture that includes millions of people and has developed complex systems of art, literature, music, social, political and religious institutions may be called a civilization. There are hundreds of cultural groups but only a handful of civilizations. Huntington has identified seven or eight contemporary civilizations in the world. These include the Western (Europe and North America), the Slavic (Russia and Eastern Europe), the Islamic, the Chinese, the Hindu, the Japanese, the Latin American, and the African.

Historians tell us that civilizations rise and fall with some frequency. Many ancient civilizations, once glorious and powerful, exist no more. Where are Rome, Greece, Egypt, Persia and Babylonia? They are on the ash heap of history. Arnold Toynbee studied 26 civilizations, and of that number only some half a dozen survive today. The Chinese and the Hindu civilizations, however, are unique in their longevity. They go back 4,000 years or even longer. The Hindu Brahmins chant hymns from the Vedas composed nearly 2,000 years before the birth of Christ. This is an amazing record of continuity for a civilization. In contrast, Islam has the shortest history at 1,400 years. Some have argued that the relative youth of Islam is the cause of its belligerence. Islam is said to be in its adolescence. I do not agree with these views.

Why a Clash of Civilizations?

First, differences among civilizations are “basic.” They involve history, language, culture, social life and religion. Different civilizations have different views about the nature of Godhead (male or female, personal or impersonal, benevolent or malevolent), the nature of man (godlike or beast-like), and relations between God and man (intimate and friendly, or distant and authoritarian). Civilizations also differ with respect to the concept of the state, liberty, democracy, secularism, pluralism, tolerance and the rule of law. Civilizations develop over centuries. Differences among them are deep seated and will not quickly disappear.

Second, the communications and the information revolution (known as modernization) that has engulfed the globe is a two edged sword. On the one hand, the increased communications among peoples of the world narrows their differences and welds different cultures into a homogenous whole. People the world over begin to look, think and act alike. On the other hand, people become more aware of their own special culture and how they are different from others. Muslims become more of Muslims, Hindus more of Hindus, Slavic more Slavic and so on. People react to the globalizing influence by going back to their roots. Omar Sheikh, the accused murderer of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl was born and educated in England but found home in Islamic fundamentalism.

Third, modernization erodes local identities. The world over, people have lost affinity for the village, the neighborhood and the family. Fundamentalist religious movements have captured the space thus vacated. A personal illustration is appropriate here: I grew up in a small village in the state of Punjab in North India during a serene period 50 years ago. People then identified themselves more with the village and less with any particular religion. In a visit to my native village several years ago, I found that religious differences had assumed nefarious importance. My village has a Sikh majority; Hindu families had left the village and migrated to nearby Hindu majority towns.

Critique

I agree with much of what Huntington says. The world conflict today appears to be among civilizations in nature and scope. However, Huntington's argument is flawed in two ways.

One, civilizations are not monolithic. They encompass a great deal of cultural, social and political diversity. The West is divided not only among Catholics, Protestants and Jews, but also between Europe and North America. Catholics and Protestants still fight in Northern Ireland. Political differences between the European Union and the United States have increased. Hinduism is similarly divided between the North and the South, and between secularists and traditionalists.

Islam is even more fractured. It has numerous warring factions: Sunni versus Shia, Wahabis versus mainline Muslims, secularists versus fundamentalists, the Arab versus the Turk. The bloodiest conflict of the second half of the 20th century was

the decade long war between Iran (Shia) and Iraq (Sunni dominated under Saddam Hussein).

My second disagreement with Huntington concerns the nature of the civilizational conflict. Huntington argues that the coming world conflict will be between “the West and the rest.” The “rest” includes the entire non-Western world.

The central axis of world politics is likely to be the conflict between “the West and the rest,” and the responses of non-Western civilizations to Western power and values.

I do not think so. A war between the West and the entire non-Western world is unlikely. The non-Western world may have some common grievances against the West, but it is not unified. In a war of civilizations, the U.S. may well have non-Western allies in Japan and India.

My Hypothesis

It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in the new world will be between radical Islam or Islamism and greater part of the rest of humanity. Radical Islam is at war with every other religion and cultural group. Militant Islamic anger is directed against Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Slavs and animists. Examine below the list of groups against whom radical Islam wages war:

- Roman Catholics in Mindanao in the Philippines
- Roman Catholics in Timor in Indonesia
- Confucians and Buddhists in Singapore and Malaysia
- Hindus in Bangladesh
- Hindus in Kashmir and within India itself
- Russian Orthodox Catholics in Chechnya
- Armenian Christians in Nagorno-Karabakh
- Maronite Christians in Lebanon
- Jews in Israel and in all other parts of the world
- Animists and Christians in Sudan
- Ethiopian Orthodox Christians in Eritrea
- Greek Orthodox Catholics in Cyprus
- Slavs in Bosnia, Kosovo and Albania
- Coptic Christians in Egypt

Ibos in Nigeria
Christians and Jews in the United States
Moderate Islamic Regimes in Egypt, Jordan and Turkey

Militant Islam is in ferment everywhere. The Islamic world appropriately is said to have “bloody borders.”

Why is this so? The explanation may lie in Islamic theology, Islamic history, and the economics of oil.

Islamic theology

Islamic militancy arises out of its monotheistic theology. There is no other God but Allah. Islamic God Allah is jealous. He brooks no rivals. He claims sole sovereignty. He proclaims Jihad or Holy War on unbelievers, *kafirs*. Prophet Mohammad is regarded as the final and the seal of prophets. Lesser prophets such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, Moses and Jesus are recognized as precursors but Mohammad is the most perfect. Like Christians, Muslims also believe in a single life, a single judgment and eternal life either in heaven or hell.

It is obvious that this theology of a single God, a single prophet, a single revelation, a single church or *ummah*, a single life and a single judgment leads to intolerance.

Not all Muslims however read the Quran the same way. There are passages in the Quran which preach religious tolerance. For example, one of the verses says: “There is no compulsion in religion.” And, another, “To you your religion and to me mine.” Moderate Muslims emphasize the tolerant nature of their religion. It is evident from recent happenings that extremists have outflanked the moderates and now dominate the religious dialogue.

Christian theology is similar to Islamic theology in various respects. Christianity also posits the doctrine of a Single Jealous God, and of the Only Begotten Son. The history of Christianity is dotted with periods of persecution of non-Christians. The Spanish Inquisition of the 16th century was an extreme case of this intolerance.

Christianity however was reformed and its hold on European nations was seriously eroded during the Age of Rationalism. Secularism arose and gradually the Church

and the state were separated. Tolerance of religious diversity gradually grew. There is religious fundamentalism in the West, but the West has come a long way in accepting pluralism in matters of religious belief. Christian churches and Jewish Synagogues exist side by side in the West. Even non-Western religions such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism now flourish in the West. I learned that there are 1,500 Islamic Mosques in Britain alone.

The so-called New Age or New Thought churches (such as Unity, Unitarianism, Science of Mind, and Practical Christianity) are a rapidly growing phenomenon in the West. These New Thought religions borrow a great deal of their theology from the East, especially from Hinduism and Buddhism. The doctrines of Karma, reincarnation, meditation, and yoga are now widely accepted. Vegetarianism has gained ground. The notion of a female Deity is no longer a strange concept. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* is among the best selling books. Brown's book highlights the positive role in early Christianity of Mary Magdalene, one of the female disciples of Jesus.

In contrast to medieval Christianity and radical Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are tolerant of religious diversity. The list of tolerant religious traditions includes not only Hindus and Buddhists but also many ancient religions such as Taoists, Shintoists, European Celts, the Egyptians, Platonists, and Pythagoreans. The older traditions generally recognized many prophets and teachers as being authentic. Many paths to spiritual salvation were recognized and validated. One can climb the mountain peak by taking one of the several paths. By their very nature, the pre-Christian and pre-Islamic people were tolerant.

Hindu India illustrates the point being made here. Christianity came to India with St. Thomas in the first century A.D., long before it became popular in the West. Judaism came to India after the Jewish temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. and the Jews were expelled from their homeland. In a recent book titled *Who Are the Jews of India?* (2000), author Nathan Katz observes that India is the only country where the Jews were not persecuted. "The Indian chapter is one of the happiest of the Jewish Diaspora." (p. 4). Both Christians and Jews have existed in a predominant Hindu India for centuries without being persecuted.

Zoroastrians or Parsees from Persia (present Iran) entered India to flee Islamic conquest in the 7th and 8th centuries. The Parsees are an affluent community in the city of Bombay in Western India without a sense of having been persecuted.

Among the richest business families in India are the Parsees; for example, the Tata family controls a huge industrial empire. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the powerful Prime Minister of India, was married to Feroze Gandhi, a Parsee (no relation to Mahatma Gandhi).

The history of China and Japan is similar to that of India in matters of religious tolerance. Buddhism from India was introduced into China peacefully. No armed conflict ensued between Buddhism and Chinese native traditions of Taoism and Confucianism. Similarly Buddhism came to Japan peacefully. The Shinto and Buddhist traditions are well integrated in Japanese life. In a recent visit to Japan, I noticed that Shinto shrines allow the worship of Buddhist icons. Christianity entered Japan in the 16th century. The Jesuit missionaries were allowed to convert people to their faith. The Jesuit missionaries, however, began to teach that the traditional Japanese gods were false and that Christianity was the only true religion. This led to their persecution by the Japanese government.

Islamic History

Islam may be dated to 610 AD, when Mohammad began having conversations with Archangel Gabriel. Mohammad's message one true God named Allah attracted a number of followers. But the leaders of Mecca rejected his new teaching. Conflict ensued. In 622, Mohammad was forced to flee to Medina, some 240 miles to the North. The year of the flight, 622 AD, is significant as it marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar. Mohammad became the leader of Medina and within a few years felt emboldened to raid Mecca. Mohammad's actions were brilliant and bold. Mecca signed a treaty of friendship and allowed Muslims to enter the city for pilgrimage. By the time Mohammad died in 632 AD at age 62, he had become the supreme figure in all of Arabia.

Muslim conquest did not stop with the death of Mohammad. Within two years, the holy warriors attacked and conquered Byzantium and Persia, the two powerful empires of the period. The warriors were filled with religious zeal and hopes for war booty. It seemed that, armed with faith in Allah, nothing could stop the soldiers of Islam. In 712, Arabs captured Sindh on the frontiers of India. In 715 they subdued Spain after conquering North Africa.

In less than 100 years since Mohammad's death, the Islamic rule stretched from the frontiers of India all the way to Spain. Victories resumed after a hiatus of three

centuries. Believers captured Anatolia (Turkey) in 1071, the throne of Delhi in 1201, and Constantinople in 1453.

Islam's rapid rise from obscurity to a world power had a touch of the miraculous for Muslims; how could they have attained all this without God's favor and support? The fabulous military victories demonstrated to the faithful God's pleasure with those who believed.

Islam's explosive beginning has implications for modern politics. Memory of early success has given to Muslims faith in their cause. Setbacks are temporary. Eventual world dominion is assured. Early success meant that Muslims did not need to negotiate with the infidel. Muslims unlike most other people have an immense historical awareness. Roughly from 1,000 AD to 1,700 A.D., Islam was the strongest civilization on earth. The Muslims enjoyed the greatest wealth; they wielded the most power. And then, suddenly in the 17th century, the empire collapsed. In 1660, a Hindu Raja Shivaji defeated a Mogul army in Western India, and in 1683, the Turkish army failed in its siege of Vienna and was forced to retreat. This turned the tide against Islam.

Memories of uninterrupted conquests are alive in the minds of militant Muslims. Osama bin-Laden and his compatriots draw inspiration from the 700-year long history of an Islamic empire. They also believe that they were cheated of world dominion, when Islam lost its hold both in India and Europe in the 17th century.

The Consequences of Oil Boom

Islamic radicalism is three decades old and goes back to the period of the oil boom. The huge wealth derived from petroleum in the Arab Sheikhdoms has given rise to the belief that Muslims are favored by God. The extraordinary oil wealth, much like Muslim military victory in an earlier period, is taken as a sign of God's happiness with Muslims and the justness of the Islamic cause.

Petro-dollars have been used to spread Islamic radicalism around the globe. The Saudi Government and its charities continue to fund thousands of religious schools or *Madrassas*. These schools have been called factories for Jihad. Some 40,000 to 50,000 of these clerical schools exist within Pakistan alone. The oil rich Saudi Arabia preaches Wahabism, a puritanical branch of Islam. According to Fareed Zakaria of *Newsweek*, the Saudi Kingdom has made the biggest Devil's bargain. It

deflects attention from its misrule by funding religious extremism abroad.

The war in Afghanistan against the former Soviet Union has also led to extremism and militancy. A rag-tag army of the Holy Warriors defeated a super power, which promoted the belief that religious zeal and the way of Allah could defeat the mightiest of armies.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Economic reform is often suggested as a solution to militancy. The poverty of Afghanistan is taken as a cause for its political instability. It is also said that the unemployed youth turn to religious extremism for comfort.

The poverty-radicalism thesis fails at both the level of the individual and at the level of the society. The 19 hijackers that attacked the World Trade Center were not poverty stricken. Osama bin-Laden is a millionaire. The militants are better educated and often originate from middle class backgrounds.

Poor societies are not the hotbed of militancy. Bangladesh and Niger are not their breeding ground. The militants are most likely to be found in the oil rich Middle Eastern countries and in Pakistan. Fifteen of the 19 hijackers who crashed into World Trade Center Towers were Saudi nationals. The entire Taliban leadership was nurtured in Pakistani *madrassas*.

Economic development is good and should be pursued vigorously. But it will not necessarily lead to moderation: building factories will not reduce the appeal of religion.

Fareed Zakaria, an Indian Moslem with the *Newsweek* calls radical Islam “an armed doctrine,” a term that he borrowed from Edmund Burke. “Like other armed doctrines before it-- fascism for example--it can be discredited only by first being defeated.” When Hitler scored military victories, he was much admired. Many children in Europe and Latin America were named after him. When Nazism suffered defeat, the children were given new names. Bin Laden understands the aura of victory: “When people see a weak horse and a strong horse, by nature they prefer the strong horse.” Bin Laden claims to be the stronger horse (*Newsweek*, December 24, 2001, 23-28).

Even though Iraq might have been a wrong target to fight radical Islamism, America's war against militants in Iraq must not fail for this reason. A failure in Iraq will have global repercussions. It would embolden extremist elements around the globe. It will negatively impact India's war against terrorism. A success in Iraq on the other hand will pave the way for moderation in the rest of the world.

Concluding Thoughts

Americans and Indians generally are tolerant in matters of religion. They believe in pluralism; they believe that every religion should be respected. Tolerance is good, but it must not lead to appeasement or passivity. Tolerance must not mean that I am tolerant of someone else's intolerance.

Radical Muslim attacks on Hindus are regular phenomena in India. These attacks are not well publicized in the West. Hindu retaliation in the state of Gujarat receives much greater publicity than the ethnic cleansing of Hindu Pundits in the state of Kashmir.

The challenge of radical Islam is global. It affects all of us, including moderate Muslims in the Islamic countries. We cannot dismiss the conflict between Hindus and Muslims or between Jews and Muslims as ancient hatreds in distant lands. The 9/11 attack on WTC shows that radical Islam is very much in America. The problem of radicalism and militancy will not go away until dealt with.

As a first step the scholars have the responsibility to open up radical Islam for a critical examination. Moderate Muslims can best accomplish this goal. They must throw the light of reason on radical Islamic theology and its history of imperialism. All extremist ideologies have been scrutinized and exposed, including slavery, the Inquisition, apartheid, fascism, Nazism, colonialism, imperialism, and recently communism. Only radical Islam avoids exposition. This point is elaborated in Bat Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude*, Fairleigh Dickinson University, 1996.

I do not foresee a war of civilizations as described by Huntington. I do see a challenge to civilization from religious extremism. I have focused in this article on Islamic extremism because at the present time it is the most virulent and poses the greatest threat to peace. Religious extremism exists in many countries including the

United States and India. Extremism in all forms whether it originates in Christianity, Hinduism or Islam must be fought everywhere.

Population Estimates for Different Civilizations, 2004

(Based on data of the Population Reference Bureau)

Western	Million
United States	285
Canada	31
Europe	460
Australia and New Zealand	24
Total Western	840
Latin America	525
Western including Latin America	1,325
Slavic	
Russia	145
E. Europe and the Balkans	115
Total Slavic	260
Hindu	800
Islamic	
Middle East including Iran	210
South Asia	400
Southeast Asia	220
Central Asia	80
Northern Africa	175
Total Islamic	1,085
Confucian	1,200

Japan	127
Sub-Saharan Africa	670
World	6,137

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