

CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS AND RADICAL ISLAM

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Abstract. The notion of a clash of civilizations has gained notoriety since the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. Professor Samuel Huntington has popularized this view: the coming global conflict will be among civilizations, not among political ideologies. He identified 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 present paper is the threat to civilization from radical Islam. Three factors that foment Islamic radicalism are described here: the monotheistic Islamic theology of exclusiveness, the nostalgia of a Muslim empire that lasted nearly 1,000 years, and the consequences of oil boom. 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). Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington has given new currency to the notion of a clash of civilizations. His 1993 article in *Foreign Affairs* has gained global audience. The bipolar division of the world based on political ideology (communism versus capitalism) was no longer relevant. The world had entered 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?

Culture and civilization 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 identified eight contemporary civilizations: 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 ½ dozen survive today. The Chinese and the Hindu civilizations are unique in their longevity. They go back at least 4,000 years. Hindus chant hymns from the Vedas composed at least 2,000 years before the birth of Christ. This is an amazing record of continuity for a civilization. In contrast, Islam born in the 7th century 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 concepts 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 information revolution that has engulfed the globe is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it narrows cultural and language differences across national borders. It tends to meld different peoples into a homogenous whole. People the world over begin to look, think and act alike. For example, Western style dressing has caught on everywhere and English takes on the status of a global language. On the other hand, people become more aware of their own special culture and how this culture is different from others. The Internet based social media is a great tool to help spread these notions of cultural and national pride. Thus, 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, who kidnapped and likely beheaded Daniel Pearl in Karachi in 2002, was born and educated in England but found home in Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan.

Third, modernization erodes local identities. The world over, people lose affinity with the village, the neighborhood and the family. Fundamental religious movements capture 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 in 1950s. People then identified themselves more with the village and less with any particular religion. In a recent visit to my native village I found that religious differences had assumed nefarious importance. This happened in the wake of extremism that pervaded the state of Punjab in the 1980s. My village has a Sikh majority population; Hindu families have left the village and migrated to nearby Hindu majority towns.

Critique

I agree much with Huntington. The world suffers greatly on account of the violence among different civilizations. Huntington's argument may be critiqued in two respects.

One, civilizations are not monolithic. They encompass a great deal of diversity. The West is divided not only among Catholics, Protestants and Jews, but also between Europe and North

America. Catholics and Protestants fight in Northern Ireland. Britain withdrew from the European Union. Hinduism is similarly divided 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 Kurd versus the Turk. The bloodiest conflict of the second half of the 20th century was the decade long war between Iran (Shia) and Iraq (under Saddam Hussein, a Sunni).

Two, Huntington argues that the coming world conflict will be between “the West and the rest.” The rest includes the entire non-Western world. Huntington:

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 non-West is highly unlikely. The non-West is not unified and includes more than one civilization. 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 conflict in the 21st century is between radical Islam and greater part of the rest of humanity. Radical Islam is at war with every other religion and civilization. Militant Islamic anger is directed against Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Slavs and animists. Note the following battle lines.

Radical Islam is at war with:

- Roman Catholics in Mindanao in the Philippines
- Roman Catholics in Timor in Indonesia
- Buddhists in Singapore and Malaysia
- Hindus in Bangladesh
- Hindus in India
- Ahmadiyas in Pakistan
- 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
- Orthodox Christians in Eritrea
- Greek Orthodox Catholics in Cyprus
- Slavs in Bosnia, Kosovo and Albania
- Coptic Christians in Egypt
- Yazidis in Iraq
- Ibos in Nigeria
- Christians and Jews in the United States
- Moderate Islamic Regimes in Egypt, Jordan, Turkey and elsewhere

Militant Islam is in ferment everywhere. The Islamic world has bloody borders.

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

Islamic theology

Islamic militancy arises out of its monotheistic theology. There is no other God but Allah. Allah is jealous. He brooks no rivals. He claims sole sovereignty. Other Gods are false. 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. Muslims believe in a single life, a single judgment and eternal life either in heaven or hell.

This theology of a single God, a single prophet, a single revelation, a single community or *ummah*, a single life and a single judgment leads to intolerance. We are reminded about the ferocity unleashed by monotheism on 9/11/2001. Writes Jonathan Kirsch:

The men who hijacked and crashed four civilian airliners were inspired to sacrifice their own lives, and to take the lives of several thousand ‘infidels,’ because they had embraced the simple but terrifying logic that lies at the heart of monotheism: if there is only one god, if there is only one right way to worship that god, then there is only one fitting punishment for failing to do so—death.¹

Not all Muslims however read the Quran the same way. Certain verses in the Quran proclaim religious tolerance: “There is no compulsion in religion.” Another verse says: “To you your religion and to me mine.” Moderate Muslims emphasize the tolerant nature of their religion. It is evident though that the extremists have outflanked the moderates and now dominate the religious dialogue.

In certain respects, Christian theology is similar to Islamic theology. 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 during the Renaissance and the Age of Rationalism. Religion’s hold on European life has seriously eroded. Secularism arose and gradually the Church and the state were separated. Tolerance of religious diversity grew. 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. The non-Western religions of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism have gained an important presence in the West. There are 1,500 Islamic Mosques in Britain, and 2,000 in the United States, I have been told.

The so-called New Age or New Thought churches (such as Unity, Unitarianism, Science of

1. *God Against the Gods: The History of the War between Monotheism and Polytheism*, Viking Compass, 2006, p. 2.

Mind, and Practical Christianity) are a rapidly growing phenomenon in the West. New Thought theology borrows a great deal from the East, especially from Hinduism and Buddhism. The doctrines of Karma, reincarnation, meditation, and yoga have avid followers. Vegetarianism has gained ground. The notion of a female Deity has gained support. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) was a popular book. Brown's book highlights the positive role in early Christianity of Mary Magdalene, a female disciple of Jesus. Pensacola has two Buddhist temples and several Yoga and meditation centers.

The changes incorporated in Christianity over the past 300 years have not yet found a home within Islam.

Hinduism, Buddhism, Confusionism, and Shintoism are inherently pluralistic in their doctrine and practice.

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 took 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 Allah's favor and support? The fabulous military victories demonstrated to the faithful God's pleasure with Islam and punishment on infidels.

Islam was the strongest military power on earth for nearly 700 years (approximately 1000 to 1700). The Muslims enjoyed the greatest wealth; they had the biggest harems and lived in the most grandiose palaces. And then suddenly in the 17th century, the empire collapsed. In 1660 Maharaja Shivaji defeated Muslim armies in India. This set the ball rolling. In 1683, the Turkish army failed in its siege of Vienna and was forced to retreat (interestingly on 9/11). This turned the tide against Islam. In subsequent 200 years, Islamic lands fell under Western colonial rule.

Islam's explosive beginning has implications for modern politics. Memory of early success has given to Islamists faith in their invincibility. Setbacks are temporary. Eventual world dominion

is assured. Early success meant that radical Muslims did not need to negotiate with the infidel or with their moderate countrymen. Memories of a glorious past are alive. The Muslim empire collapsed in the 17th century. Osama bin-Laden and the Islamic State or ISIS wish to turn the clock back.

The Consequences of Oil Boom

Islamic radicalism is some five decades old. It goes back to the period of the oil boom in the 1970s and 1980s. The huge wealth derived from petroleum in the Arab Sheikdoms has given rise to the belief that Muslims are favored by Allah. The extraordinary oil wealth, much like Muslim military victory in an earlier period, is taken as a sign of God's happiness with Muslims.

Petro-dollars have been used to spread Islamic radicalism around the globe. The Saudi Government has spearheaded thousands of religious schools or *Madrassas*. Some 40,000 to 50,000 exist within Pakistan alone. These Islamic schools have been called factories for Jihad. Next to petroleum, Saudi Arabia's largest export is Wahabism. Wahabism is a puritanical branch of Islam. It seeks to cleanse Islamic society of western influences, by violence when necessary. Fareed Zakaria of *Newsweek* observed: the Saudi Kingdom has made the biggest Devil's bargain. It deflects attention from its misrule at home by funding religious extremism abroad.

The ousting of the former Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1979 also led to extremism and militancy. A rag-tag army of the Holy Warriors defeated a super power. The military success against the Soviet Union promoted the belief that religious zeal and the way of Allah could defeat the mightiest of armies. The United States has not done much better in Afghanistan.

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 to vent their anger.

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 on 9/11 were not poverty stricken; they were middle class youth with college degrees. Fifteen of the 19 were Saudi nationals. Osama bin-Laden was a millionaire. The militants are much better educated than the Muslim masses.

Poor societies are not the hotbed of militancy. Bangladesh and Niger are not their breeding ground. The militants are bred in the oil rich Middle Eastern countries and in Pakistan. The entire Taliban leadership was nurtured in Pakistani *madrassas*, or Islamic schools. British born and educated kids travelled to the Middle East to fight with ISIS.

Economic development is good and should be pursued vigorously for its own end. But it will not necessarily lead to moderation. Building factories will not reduce the appeal of radicalism.

Fareed Zakaria, a moderate Muslim, calls radical Islam "an armed doctrine." "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 understood the aura of victory: “When people see a weak horse and a strong horse, by nature they prefer the strong horse.” Bin Laden claimed to be the stronger horse (Fareed Zakaria in *Newsweek*, December 24, 2001, 23-28).

America’s misguided war in Iraq has also emboldened the radicals.

Concluding Thought

The challenge of radical Islam is global. It affects all of us, including moderate Muslims. The problem of radicalism and militancy will not go away until successfully dealt with.

As a first step the scholars have the responsibility to open up radical Islam for critical examination. Moderate Muslims can best accomplish this goal. They must throw the light of reason on radical Islamic theology and its history of violence. All extremist ideologies have been scrutinized and exposed, including slavery, the Inquisition, apartheid, fascism, Nazism, colonialism, imperialism, and communism. Only radical Islam avoids serious exposition.

I do not foresee a war of civilizations. I do see a challenge to civilization from religious extremism; in particular from radical Islam. Islamic extremism at present is the most virulent challenge to civilization. Scholars have a duty to throw light on it.

Approximate Population Size for Different Civilizations, ca 2016
(Numbers are approximate)

Western Civilization	Million
United States	320
Canada	35
Western Europe	500
Australia and New Zealand	30
Total Western	885
Latin America	601
Total Western incl. Latin America	1,486
Slavic Civilization	
Russia	145
E. Europe and the Balkans	115
Total Slavic	260
Hindu Civilization (India, Nepal Sri Lanka, West Indies, etc)	800

Islamic	
Middle East including Iran	310
South Asia	500
Southeast Asia	250
Central Asia	80
Northern Africa	200
Total Islamic	1,340
Chinese	1,300
Japanese	127
Sub-Saharan African	700
Other	1,044
World	7,000

More recent population data are available at Population Reference Bureau: www.prb.org

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