

Clash of Civilisations? – Dispelling the Myths¹

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There are some who would like to believe that the renowned pronouncement of the world being a single village – made by globalization theorists – has been soundly refuted by the events of September 11. This view is supported by President George W. Bush's 'you're either with us or against us' ultimatum. The resultant polarisation suggests that our planet now consists of two villages instead of one: that of Islam and the West.

The 'two village' sketch holds very serious ramifications for the global community and has to be considered very carefully. It also leaves us with the dubious burden of having to deal with two 'village-idiots.' If the powers-that-be decide to divide the globe even further then we face the humiliating prospect of seeing the number of 'idiots' increasing incrementally.

The Islam/West polarisation was popularised in the last decade by Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilisations?* article, in the Spring 1993 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. In it, Huntington asserted that the great divisions among humankind are cultural, and predicted that conflict in global politics in the coming years would be between nations and groups of different civilisations. He surveys seven or eight major civilisations as potentially threatening but devotes most of his attention to the possible conflict between Islam and the West. This thesis is now being received in some quarters as prophetic. The mere fact that it seems compelling enough in light of recent events does not necessarily render it true.

It is not altogether untrue to suggest that there are differences between an Islamic worldview and a secular or Western worldview. This is a fact readily affirmed by both Muslims and Westerners alike. It is however rather scandalous to exploit such differences to affirm an impending clash of civilisations. This is akin to mixing truth with falsehood. The motivation behind emphasizing such differences needs to be unmasked and further explored.

In order to consider the possibility of a clash of civilisations one needs to be able to conceive of Islam and the West as easily distinguishable civilisations today. Mohammed Muqtedar Khan challenges this distinction in his article *Dialogue of Civilisations?* in the June 1997 issue of the London-based cultural forum, *The Diplomat*. Khan's major contention is that the West often denies the contribution of Islamic civilisation to the emergence of modernity in Europe. He asserts that intellectuals like Huntington and Bernard Lewis – both very powerful voices that influence American foreign policy – stand accused of intellectual bigotry for perpetuating such myths.

For Khan Islamic civilisation is one of the three fundamental sources of 'the West', along with ancient Greek philosophy and the Judeo-Christian tradition. He thus concludes that "to a great extent, Islam and the West are 'shared civilisations' th[at] have shaped and continue to reshape each other."

Apart from the dilemma of separating Islamic and Western civilisations conceptually today (it is easier to speak about heritages or legacies), it is difficult even to separate the Western and Islamic worlds in terms of political dispensation. It is true that the West is far more cohesive in this regard. All nation-states that have embraced and managed to implement the ideal of liberal democracy can be said to fall under the ambit of the West. The case of countries with Muslim-majority populations is far more complex. The political spectrum spans a wide range, from repressive dictatorships to countries with representational governments and strong liberal inclinations.

The 'Islamic State' remains a chimera and has not been eloquently or viably articulated in this day and age. Therefore, how can Islam possibly be a real threat to the West's liberal democratic dispensation merely on the basis of an aspiration? This is another compelling reason to strongly deny any Islam/West polarisation. Why then, do we still hear certain quarters emphasising this Cold War-style division?

Khan is convinced that such fabricated dichotomies are no more than trump cards in the game of political domination: "It is only by emphasising difference that the Western elite

can justify policies of domination against a different, foreign and inferior ‘other’.” This cynical game regards double standards as a principle rather than a prohibition. Khan uses Iran – which has been vilified on the basis of being a totalitarian and non-democratic regime – as a hypothetical example. He suggests that if Iran had for some reason to become an ally of the West, the latter could reason that Iran had actually experienced a French-style revolution, in the process eliminating monarchy and striving to implement democracy in its Majlis.

The case of Saudi Arabia presents an exemplary instance of double standards. The country has strong ties with the United States and enjoys the status of a close ally in spite of allowing absolutely no political participation to its citizens. Similarly, Afghanistan’s Taliban regime, which was initially sustained with American assistance, has seen its status change from friend to foe in less than a decade. The only difference this makes to Afghani citizens is that they now bear the brunt of persecution internally as well as externally. Therefore, the ‘clash of civilisations’ construct clearly fails to provide a basis for differentiating between Islam and the West. It is not only exploitative and vague, but far too porous to retain any substance.

When contrasting Islam and the West it is more accurate to speak about differing ideals, philosophies, and worldviews. In order to reach a meaningful understanding of the differences one needs to examine the *moral standard* generated by the West and Islam. This is a significant tool for dispelling myths, especially about Islam.

The Western worldview was predominantly influenced by the European Enlightenment, which marked a decisive shift from the thought paradigm of the Middle Ages. Religion was removed as principle and base of identity and replaced by reason. Although Westernisation developed and advanced the bureaucratic mechanisms of society, it has not been successful at eradicating the central predicament of humanity; the loss of a universal sense of human value. ‘Instrumental reason’ – a term used by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor – allowed for the fulfillment of irrational objectives by rational means. The Nazi death-camps are but a single, harrowing, example. The moral

standard created by this worldview allowed the human subject to determine all values. Good and evil would be determined by societal consensus. The long-term effect has been the affirmation of a moral relativism where the justness of a course is determined by the ambitions of the powerful.

Abdul Wahab Elmessiri, an Arab scholar of note, asserts that oppressive ideologies of the past and present – like Nazism and Zionism – are not exceptional to or outside the domain of the Western worldview. He argues in his writings that the culture of genocide is a distinctive characteristic of western modernist discourse and reflects a general pattern of extermination that began in the West from the time of the Renaissance in territories like North America, right up to the present in countries like Vietnam, Chechnya and Bosnia.

The atrocities being currently perpetrated upon the Afghani people simply represent another name on the list. Modern western history has given no indication to suggest that the ideal of universal standards applicable to both the Centre and the Periphery is in anyway achievable.

The Islamic worldview – by contrast – places great emphasis on certain basic tenets of faith. Belief in God, revelation and accountability in the afterlife are of fundamental importance. These beliefs spawn a very specific moral standard that rejects relativistic reasoning and demands submission to certain universal principles.

Morals and values are not determined by societal consensus but by the normative teachings of the Qur'an. Belief in accountability in the afterlife ingrains an awareness and responsibility for all actions. Transgression is punishable by law in this world and by God in the hereafter. Therefore, every believer is certain that he or she will ultimately bear the consequences of his/her actions.

It must be stressed that in spite of these beliefs we still find tremendous disparity in the behavior of adherents to the faith. However, the importance of stressing these beliefs is

that they have the potential of acting as a tremendous moral corrective for those who internalise them, in addition to providing a benchmark whereby the believer is held accountable. In addition to this, Muslim-majority countries are till today struggling to shrug off the effects of colonisation. The political landscape is still dominated by ruling elites and the masses are as yet unable to freely articulate their Islamic aspirations. Islamists who are politically active face persecution and demonisation by repressive state apparatuses. A cursory glance at countries like Algeria, Tunisia, Syria, and even Egypt lend support to this assertion.

Islam and the West clearly differ in their philosophies and worldviews, and therefore face different moral challenges. These need to be met in order to bridge the gap between the 'two poles'. The biggest moral challenge facing the West is overcoming double standards; that it may be able to judge outsiders by the same principles it uses to judge its own. The challenge facing Muslims is to rekindle an awareness of their own ideal as well as to assert their right to express this ideal; to remind themselves that all actions bear accountability and that they too are ultimately liable for moral relativism, even if they cloak their actions in the mantle of Islam. Ultimately, the measure of success or failure in meeting these challenges is exacted from all of humanity.

¹ This article was originally a presentation delivered at the University of Cape Town's Centre for Conflict Resolution on 1 November 2001.