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Can Religion Mitigate the Clash of Civilizations?

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Introduction

Samuel D. Huntington, one of the 20th century’s best historians, died on Christmas Eve, 2008. His obituary has been widely observed in the press, and those of us who were galvanized by his 1993 essay in Foreign Affairs Magazine: “Clash of Civilizations,” (and the 1998 book: Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order) have been discussing and debating his ideas ever since.

While many were thinking that with the end of the Cold War, the world was inevitably headed in the direction of an obvious world order, Huntington was seeing the next conflicts. He wrote:

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.

The cultural divides say, between the West and China, have not yet risen to the level of conflict, and our interconnectedness makes that increasingly unlikely. But where Huntington was right on target was that the clash between the secular, modern West and Militant Islamism could push us to global warfare. He described the Muslim world as having “bloody borders,” which to a large extent is true.

Observers such as Fouad Ajami (and, I confess, myself) thought that Huntington was overlooking the sometimes even more deadly conflicts within a culture (or in this case, Islam). I considered the educated, secular elites of the Muslim world little different from their European or American counterparts. But Huntington saw something more: that the violent, bitter minority of Militant Islamists could gradually silence the rest and head us all for war. He wrote this before 9/11 turned him into a prophet, not just a scholar.

But Islam is not the only militant religion in certain parts of the world making war. In Africa, there is growing warfare between Christians and Muslims in active conversion campaigns, meeting in Nigeria with violence. In village India, Muslim and Militant Hindus periodically and violently erupt in conflict. India’s Kashmir, once a vale of peace, has been the site of violence and terrorism that has on occasion risen to state violence (India and Pakistan). In Thailand, the struggle is between Buddhists and Muslims. And, of course, the struggle over land that once characterized Palestinian/Israeli conflicts has now morphed into a Militant Islamist vs. both secular
Arab and secular and religious Israel. It is no longer two secular cultures fighting over property.

Those of us educated in the secular West like to see ourselves as rational beings, more motivated by enlightened self-interest than emotion. We owe this view to our ancestors who promoted "enlightenment," an 18th century notion that was contrasted against the then-perceived irrationality of organized religion. However, they were optimists. There are plenty of historic examples of human beings enmeshed in very irrational ideologies that defy enlightened self-interest.

This raises the question about human issues behind warfare—and even more important, questions about the very nature of human beings. Are we *Homo Economicus*, as many government planners suppose, or are we really *Homo Ideologicus*? And was Toynbee right that religion is essential to a civilization? Every great civilization up to his time was characterized by a set of beliefs provided by an organized religion. The question is—is this still a valid element in today's secular civilizations?

I believe that history can provide examples of both the rational and irrational—those motivated by bread alone (the pragmatists) and those motivated by often extremely irrational ideas that ignore economic considerations. But I also believe that most of us are in the former camp (we are happy having work, family, food, and a relatively participatory society) but a dangerous minority are caught up in an idea that becomes more important to them than any other consideration. There is also the other issue of pragmatic considerations (greed, power) hiding behind religious ideology.

In this 200th anniversary year of Charles Darwin’s birth, some scientists are looking at the roots of our irrationality in our process of evolution.

This is a field worth following. But now: here are some examples of the irrational in human history.

**The Irrational Element in History**

**A. Phoenicians.** This ancient Mediterranean culture was noted for its pragmatism and both seagoing and trading skills. They were the model for all successive mercantile people, planting colonies throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond. They created an alphabet to assist them in keeping shipping records—an alphabet that other people used to write some of the world’s greatest literature. If the Phoenicians wrote literature, we have never seen it.

Now, how does such a rational people devise a hideously irrational religion? They worshipped and feared a god named Baal, their chief fertility god, whom they thought could only be pacified by the sacrifice of their first-born babies. The Greeks and Romans, both of whom had embarrassing human sacrifice in their earliest times, were horrified by this slaughter of firstborns. Archaeologists today keep finding caves overflowing with the bones of babies. The Phoenicians have never left us literature defending this practice, so their history was left to their enemies to write: the Greeks,
Romans, and Hebrews (who were very familiar with and horrified by Baal in Caan).

**B. Mayans and Aztecs.** The Mayans and later Aztecs did not have the advantage of the Eurasian civilizations which had a long history of contact and influence over each other. The great civilizations of the New World appear to have lived in isolation—yet were extraordinarily vibrant and creative. Both of these great Mexican societies had intellectual accomplishments in astronomy, hydrology, governance, economic trade systems, and agronomy. They (and their unknown counterparts in South America) independently developed foodstuffs that comprise 50 percent of today’s foods.

Despite these rational accomplishments, they devised a violent religion in which their war gods demanded human hearts. The Mayans carried out these bloodbaths when they ran into devastating natural problems: prolonged droughts, floods, or diseases. Furthermore, their entirely irrational system of internecine warfare (made more irrational by natural disaster) eventually brought down this great civilization.

**The Aztecs,** who were exceedingly rational in their organization of social institutions were completely irrational in their bloodletting. They went to war primarily to capture enough victims for the next mega-sacrifices, which made their neighbors detest them and gave the conquering Spaniards a tool for divide and conquer and justify their own bloodbaths.

**C. The Spanish Inquisition** was an institution that combined both rational and irrational elements. On the rational side was a Spain newly unified after an 800-year conflict with Muslims who had conquered much of it in the 8th century. Spain became a melange of Christians, Muslims from North Africa and Syria, and Jews who had been in Spain since Roman times. The Reconquest of the peninsula by Christian Spaniards, although triumphant, was still marked by the insecurity of their 800-year experience under Islam. They feared a fifth column of Muslims and were very suspicious of Jews, who had often been better treated by Muslims than by the original Roman-Christian population. To address this problem, the Spanish launched an ethnic cleansing program and after expelling all practicing Jews and Muslims, they forced those who remained to convert to Christianity. Still suspicious, they began the world’s first mind-control program that created a religious secret police to investigate possible “insincerity” or “backsliding” by the new converts.

The irrationality of this procedure deprived Spain of its most valuable subjects—converted Jews who were experts in trade, economic management, and important social networks internationally; the converted Muslims who were expelled were masters of manufacture, handicrafts, and very advanced agriculture. The Inquisition also alarmed those European states that had become Protestant and fear of the Inquisition was a source of much European conflict. Spain declined from its great heights as an important European player and became a very poor backwater over the period of a century, despite the enormous loot they acquired in their conquest of the New World.
D. The Nazis. The entire ideology of Nazi racial theory was irrational, but had enormous appeal to many of their subjects. What this irrationality cost them was the brain drain of German-Jewish scientists, writers, musicians, and intellectuals. But most irrational of all was that despite Germany’s desperate conditions as they were losing World War II, they persisted in their ethnic cleansing program, tying up railroads that could better have been used in their war effort and knowing that their soon to be conquerors would be horrified by what they had done.

E. The Soviet Union. The Marxist theories of how the world works became Soviet doctrine—a totally controlled economy that from the beginning never worked well. This was an ideology based on how human beings should behave, not on how they really behave. The wreckage of this irrational ideology was exposed for all to see upon the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. However, some of the most irrational aspects of this ideology still inspire others around the world who do not recognize the sham.

F. The Palestinian Dilemma. When the United Nations proposed that the old Ottoman Turkish colony of Palestine, administered by the British as a mandate territory until 1948, be divided, the land was intended to be two modern states: Israel and Palestine. Israelis accepted; Palestinians did not, and went to war with neighboring help in an attempt to conquer the whole territory. They lost, and lost each time they went to war again over this 50-year period. If they had been rational, there would have long since been a Palestinian nation—and it might well have been part of a common economic market with Israel and perhaps others—all of whom would have benefited as the European Union has done. However, irrationality governs, and irrational ethnicity has now been subsumed by irrational religiosity.

G. The Muslim Brotherhood. This organization was founded in Egypt in 1928 by a young Egyptian schoolteacher. The Brotherhood imagined that the most perfect model for society was the Prophet Mohammad’s 7th century movement that evolved into Islam. The Brotherhood believes that they can replicate that perfection by discarding (or conquering) modern civilizational models and establish a global dictatorship ruled over by a new Caliph. Despite the delusional aspects of this ideology, many Muslims around the world who have perceived that their once great culture was no longer so have welcomed the dream. The targets of the Brotherhood’s ire are primarily the United States, Western Europe, and what they see as a western implant in their world: Israel. The special target shared by all these modern states is the emancipation of women, which holds a central role in Islamist theology as anathema.

This movement has spawned spinoffs such as Hamas and Al Qaeda, and has been influential even among their avowed enemy, Shiite Iran.

H. Iran’s Islamic Revolution. The young creators of this revolution rationally though that they were going to replace a perceived tyrannical monarchy with a western-style republic that they would run. They were oblivious to the irrational undercurrents of their companions in the revolution—the Shiite establishment. The
Shiites mastered the process of inspiring Iran's emotional population and with an ideology both irrational and very tyrannical, they reversed most of the modernizing efforts of the former monarchy. This country today, with a failing economy and the growing failure of its single economic asset—oil—is spending government funds on developing nuclear weapons and missile technology. The current president, Ahmadinejad, has directed public ire toward Israel, a country that has never harmed Iran in any way. The scene is nightmare irrational and there is no sign of enlightened self-interest.

I. The Pashtuns. This large tribe that lives in the mountainous areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan is an example of an ancient irrational order. This tribe survives on sheep herding and marginal village agriculture, yet irrationally refuses any of the changes of modernity that might better their marginal existence (except for weapons). Instead, the ideology that governs their lives is a combination of the most primitive form of Islam combined with the most destructive form of tribal life: constant warfare, aided by cycles of revenge and prideful violence.

Predominantly Rational Models in History

A. Ancient Greece and Rome. Religion evolved as a communal system of beliefs and morphed into state religion. With polytheism, there was always room for more gods, which were not seen as a threat to the state (unless, as in Rome, they started to affect subversion and loyalty to the state.) But the biggest threat to the Roman state was perceived to be the Jewish cult of Christianity, which was growing and bringing in not only slaves and the poor, but some very elite Romans. Persecution persisted for three centuries, until the tipping point was reached of too many converts to ignore. Emperor Constantine decided it was better to join and make this the state religion that he could then control. His move of the capital from Rome to Constantinople, which was already overwhelmingly Greek Christian, clinched it. Constantine was the first Western ruler who outlawed all competition to Christianity. The result: centuries of pressure and persecution of Jews and driving Mithraism into an underworld of heresies which dogged Europe for centuries.

B. Judaism. This early monotheistic cult began as henotheism, recognizing that the Hebrews had one god—but that this was not necessarily the only god. It took about 500 years to establish monotheism as doctrine (much backsliding) and that their God was God of the Universe. I believe there was influence here from Persian Zoroastrians, conquerors of Babylon, who believed that there was only one god of the universe who created the world and gave human beings free will—for good or ill. Judaism was transformed by this contact during the Babylonian Exile—and by Persian support to return from exile to the Holy Land.

Jews have never been numerous or powerful enough to threaten the larger faiths of Christianity and Islam, and their numbers suffered accordingly. Persecution and enforced conversion kept them a small minority, even today. And there is still a great
and growing divide between orthodox literalists and liberal or secular practitioners, with demographic consequences.

C. Zoroastrianism. This was a very early Aryan cult that was only taken up as the religion of the Persian elites nearly a thousand years later. It was monotheistic and ethical (the same values shared by Judaism) and was very influential during the first two Zoroastrian Persian dynasties (Achaemenid and Parthian). The conquest of Alexander the Great did damage to Zoroastrianism by massive destruction of texts and temples and slaughter of priests.

When Persia recovered and the Sasanian Dynasty came to power (300-600 AD), their chief rival was Byzantium and the Sasanians adopted some of the more authoritarian practices of the Byzantine state religion. Sasanian Persia adopted Zoroastrianism as a state faith, and enforced conformity with rigor (sequestering texts, selecting what would be orthodox, and punishing heresies with crucifixion.) One exception: they were tolerant to all other religions except heresies to Zoroastrianism, unlike Byzantium, which was not tolerant at all.

D. Islam. This religion emerged in the 7th century AD in a backwater of the world—the Arabian Peninsula. The religion was greatly influenced by Judaism and Christianity and began as rational and ethical. However, it was later transformed and damaged by Arab tribalism and Persian autocracy. Because of the exhausting wars between Byzantium and Persia, the obviously inferior Arab military force succeeded. Here religious zeal (and traditional lust for booty) triumphed.

Conquest of the Persian Empire provided Islam with both numbers (population with enforced conversion) and the administrative and cultural talent to produce a large, mainstream civilization that was more rational than emotional. Zoroastrianism was crushed over the next few centuries; only a diminishing number remain in the world today.

Islam’s numbers and power grew with conquest of formerly Byzantine imperial holdings. New scholarship is providing data on the real treatment of non-Muslims and the persecution that compelled many to convert to Islam. Vast Christian and smaller Jewish majorities in North Africa and the Levant melted in very short order—most of it involuntarily.

Later conversions (in South Asia) were more voluntary (many untouchables in India saw the advantage of converting) and merchants slowly spread their ethical and cultural system to Southeast Asians.

E. Islamic Militarism (a combination of rational and irrational zealotry) flourished in the initial thrust to conquer in the 7th century—but did not emerge again until 1098, when there was a major clash of civilizations that launched the Crusades. These wars, although appearing to be religiously motivated, were really over the older motives of power, land, and trade routes. The Christian Europeans were far behind the Muslim world in culture and technology then—but by the end of the Crusades (13th century), Europe began to flower, borrowing ideas and technologies, and eventually they overtook the Muslims, who were in decline.
Islam had another militant period with the rise of the Ottoman Turks, which played a major clash of civilizations role for three centuries—again, more rationally involved with seizure of land and wealth than the desire for converts. By the 16th century, although still impressive, they were beginning to lose the struggle. The Ottomans collapsed at the end of World War I, and their empire was broken up.

The current phase of militant Islam is in the realm of irrational religious practice.

**F. The Protestant Reformation.** Christian Europe, in the aftermath of bouts of the Black Plague, entered a period of religious turmoil and eventually religious war. The advent of the printing press, with its increase of popular literacy, broke the monopoly of learning once controlled by the Catholic Church. What began as a protest movement under Luther evolved as an ever-widening emergence of new interpretations of Christianity—and with this, the beginnings of separation of religion from state power. The rational and intellectual dominated this movement. At the conclusion of these very bitter religious wars, the doctrine of separation of church and state emerged and became the civilizational model of the most progressive part of Europe—and its colonies abroad and became a model for the 20th century developing world (and former colonies).

**G. Nationalism.** From the 19th century onward, civilizational conflicts were nationalistic and largely caused by desire for more land (and wealth). But in the 20th century, ideological issues—in a way, pseudo-religious—once more fomented the most devastating wars in human history. The age of rational, pragmatic warfare was collapsing—and ideological warfare replaced it. I believe that this model, derived from the Nazi movement and Soviet Communism, was absorbed by a rising tide of Islamic grievance and has been the basis for what Huntington identified as the Clash of Civilizations.

This sort of conflict, as we have learned in the past decade, is by far the most dangerous because it is largely beyond enlightened self-interest. It is passionate, irrational, and increasingly disdainful of the civilizational values that have emerged out of the agreed-upon values of the developed world.

It has also been particularly difficult for the developed world to understand the nature of this war. The popular model has long been that poverty and deprivation cause otherwise sensible people to embrace terrorist methods. However, very slowly, it is dawning on political realists that it is ideology driving this movement, not pragmatism.

**Examples:**

1. The unending conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians.
2. Pakistan morphing from a new secular state to an increasingly Islamist (and tribal) dysfunctional state.
3. Saudi Arabia—caught on the horns of the dilemma of modern, technological
wealth and the most primitive sort of Islamo-fascism of Wahhabi Islam. They are doing harm to the first by supporting the second with vast oil wealth.

(4) Iran, a modernizing and gradually secularizing state plunged back into a system of Medieval Shia Islam plus a modern state-controlled dictatorship. Highly irrational.

Conclusions: Can Religion Mitigate the Clash of Civilizations?

We have no examples in history of religion mitigating warring clashes between civilizations. Actually, religion helped each group to consolidate and see itself as blessed by God. Even in warfare between Christian nations, each side prayed for God’s help. In addition, some of the most bitter conflicts are within confessional groups themselves.

If the pattern of today’s conflicts can be seen as a mirror image of the religious wars of Europe, which ultimately soured many Europeans against religion, today’s illiberal religions (particularly Militant Islam) will increasingly alienate their own followers and the misguided sympathizers in the developed world. People eventually tire of this sort of conflict and support for the irrational wanes.

However, militant Atheism is no solution either. We have seen that full bore replacement of even the positive values of religions can result in dysfunctional societies that are ripe for equally irrational pseudo-religions. This happened in the 20th century with the rise of fascism and communism with their dreadful costs in human life and civilized values.

I have tried my hand at futurism (having once belonged to that association) but must caution that trying to see the future simply based on the past is fraught with hazards. Because human society has never been purely rational, human behavior well into the future is extremely difficult to predict. With this caveat, I will try to predict what may happen to the clash of civilizations during the rest of this century.

A. Will Religion Continue to Decline? In the developed world, the number of people who declare themselves to be nonbelievers in any particular religion has increased rapidly. That appears to be a trajectory that we can expect to continue as education and the growth of a large middle class continues.

B. Will Islamism Continue to Spread in the Muslim world and in Africa? There are three issues that may halt this spread. The first is that people eventually tire of continual warfare and the death of their young—and there is a growing recognition that Militant Islam has become a death cult with nothing else to offer.

The second is that the movement toward replacing petrochemicals (oil) is well on the way to creating new, nonpolluting sources of energy for the world. This will deprive the Arab world, which has been the major financer of Militant Islam’s spread, from having the funds to do this.

The third is an underreported demographic change in the world. Populations that have reached alarming size are starting to experience a drop. Some of this decline is connected
with the rise of large, educated middle-class populations who, like all such populations in the developed world, choose to have fewer children. In Europe, this decline has gone to the point that populations are not reproducing themselves and there is concern that the far more fertile Muslim immigrants will take over and spread militant Islam. However, demographers are telling us that these immigrants are following the trends of the natives and that the fertility rate is declining to European levels.

C. Will Declining Populations Bring the Clash of Civilizations to an End? We know that population explosion, particularly that of young men from 14-30, brings with it violence and lawlessness. When that population declines, order returns. We have seen this as well in the decline of inner-city crime in American cities as the population of adolescent and young men declined between the 1970s and 1990s.

D. Will Global Warming Affect the Clash of Civilizations? This issue is a big unknown. It is possible that there will be winners and losers among the world’s peoples as Global Warming affects economies and threatens the survival of some societies altogether (Bangladesh, islands, and those living in fringe areas such as the Arctic, the Andes, and the Himalayas). If desperate violence comes out of this, these latter people will lose because they do not have the means to fight developed societies.

E. Are There Any Hopeful Trends? With the world population beginning to decline, there is hope that our footprint on the world will become lighter and the need for conflict less. Rule of Law is on the increase everywhere, and rising Middle Classes support this sort of order.

F. Will There Be a Continuing Role for the great Monotheistic religions and that of Buddhism? The human need for community appears hard-wired in us. Loners are still a minority and tend to be dysfunctional. If the great religions can provide that community and can promote the best aspects of human civilization (care for others, care for ecology, and mediation of conflict), they may play an important role in the quality of our future civilization.

G. Will There Still Be Room For Emotional Religions in a Rational World? I cannot imagine a world in which at least some human beings will not require a very personal, very passionate relationship with what they perceive as the divine. We will continue to see this as a minor religious factor, unless some large global disaster emerges—in which case, this element will temporarily grow.

H. Can a civilization have coherence without having an organized religion? I certainly believe that today’s civilizations can do this—and the reason is that the best aspects of our mainstream religions have moved into the society at large—in our laws, our charities, and our ability to organize for issues larger than self-interest. Religion is not gone; it has just morphed into another form.
I. What is the greatest unknown surprise for world civilizations? Here I am reaching into an area that is futurist indeed—contact through space travel and encountering other worlds with rational beings like ourselves. Nothing could unify the earth more than that.

Finally, futurists, and that includes me, are pipe dreamers who are, occasionally, right.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

CIVILIZATIONAL HISTORY


LeBlanc, Steven and Register, Katherine E., Constant Battles: The Myth of the Peaceful, Noble Savage, St. Martin's Press, NY, 2003,


ECOLOGICAL ISSUES IN HISTORY


https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol62/iss62/12
Keynote Lectures

MILITANT ISLAM


Habeck, Mary R.: *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror*, Yale University Press, 2006.


POPULATION EXPLOSION/IMPLESION


Jones, Elise and Westoff, Charles: “Executive Summary: Fertility Decline in Muslim Countries,” July 2003, for UN Population Program.