

Twenty Years after Huntington's 'Clash of Civilisations'

Written by Jeffrey Haynes

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JEFFREY HAYNES, FEB 10 2013

Today: Mali; yesterday: 9/11; the day before yesterday: Iran's 1979 revolution and its aftermath, including sustained hostilities with the USA. Since the late 1970s, the talk has been of the impossibility of different sets of values, norms and beliefs living side-by-side in an increasingly globalised world. In 1993, Samuel Huntington published what must be one of the most cited articles ever: 'The Clash of Civilizations?' (*Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, pp. 22-48). Why is the article so important? Why is it a touchstone for nearly all contemporary debates about the capacity of different groups to live together in relative amity not enmity?

My argument in this brief piece is not that Huntington's article was so important because his argument was 'correct' or 'right'. My claim is twofold: First, Huntington's article was and is important because it captured perfectly the end-of-the-Cold War *zeitgeist*, a way of seeing the world which has endured in the uncertain times which we call 'globalisation.' Second, it has proved to be an abiding statement about globalisation and the hopes and fears that it conveys.

It is almost irrelevant that his focal point: the impossibility of the West – read; the USA – and 'Islam' – read; 'Islamic fundamentalism' – living together in harmony was laughingly over-simplified, redolent of the paranoia of someone experiencing the shattering of a stable, safe and unchanging world suddenly and demonstrably confronted with the scenario of the post-World War II paradigm smashed to smithereens. What is a card-carrying Realist to do? Of course: find a new enemy and dress it up in the same preposterous 'baddy' clothes that had marked the treatment by US Realists of the USSR since the start of the Cold War and transfer the characteristics to a new 'actor': 'Islamic fundamentalism.'

It is worth recalling – especially for our younger readers – that in the early 1990s, we had just emerged from a 50-year period of secular ideological polarisation. Despite the claims of some today in the USA, the US did not 'win' the Cold War; rather, the Soviet Union 'lost' it. Unable to compete with America in a completion for global dominance, its shaky, dysfunctional and misanthropic political/social/economic system spectacularly imploded within a seemingly impossibly short period of time: apparently as strong as ever in the mid-1980s, by 1991, the Soviet Union and its system as well as its parasitic coterie of attendant nations was no more. This left a gulf, a hole, a vacuum. How, and with what, to fill it?

If globalisation was the force which defeated the USSR, it was also the trend that enabled religion to resume its long-abandoned place in global politics. Exiled to marginalisation after 1648, the sudden demise of the Cold War and the USSR and its attendant secular ideology, opened the way for a new focus on 'culture'. Now, as everyone knows who has ever played a word association game, 'religion' is almost a synonym for 'culture', because what primarily differentiates cultures from each other is religion and, especially, religious difference.

The 9/11 attacks on the United States were a key event in the debate about the role of cultural and religious difference – especially, 'Islamic fundamentalism' – in international conflict, especially in the way that they focused attention on al-Qaeda's brand of globalised cultural terrorism. For some scholars, analysts and policy makers – especially but not exclusively in the United States – 9/11 marked the practical onset of Samuel Huntington's 'clash of

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civilisations' between two cultural entities: the 'Christian West' and the 'Islamic world', with special concern directed at those entities which might attract the nomenclature 'Islamic fundamentalists.' This is not to claim of course that Huntington had it all his own way: Many have addressed his claims of global cultural conflict between the 'Christian West' and the 'Islamic fundamentalists' by a counter-argument: 9/11 was not the *start* of a clash of civilisations but rather the *last gasp* of transnational Islamist radicalism. (It remains to be seen if the unfolding events in Mali and Algeria are the start of a new phase.) It is hard to disagree with the claim that the events of September 11 thrust culture on to forefront of the international agenda, providing as a result Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' thesis with a new lease of life. Henceforward, many commentators were no longer inhibited in attributing essentialist characteristics to the 'Christian West' and 'Islam'. After 9/11, there was a pronounced penchant to see the world in a Huntington-inspired simplistic division, with straight lines on maps – 'Islam has bloody borders', he averred (p. 35) – apparently the key to understanding what were increasingly portrayed as definitively ethically and racially defined lines across the globe.

September 11, 2001, as well as many subsequent terrorist outrages, were perpetrated by al-Qaeda or its followers; all involved extremist Muslims that wanted to cause destruction and loss of life against 'Western' targets that nevertheless often led to considerable loss of life, for example in Istanbul and Casablanca, among Muslims. The US response – the Bush administration's 'war on terror' – targeted Muslims, some believe rather indiscriminately, in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere. Some have claimed that these events 'prove' the correctness of Huntington's thesis on the 'clash of civilisations'. In such views, the 9/11 attacks and the US response suggested that Huntington's prophecy about clashing civilisations was now less abstract and more plausible than when first articulated in the early 1990s. Others contend, however, that 9/11 was not the start of the clash of civilisations – but, as already noted, the last gasp of radical Islamists' attempts to foment revolutionary change in *inter alia*, Algeria and Egypt in the 1980s and early 1990s. We can also note, however, that 9/11 not only had major effects on both the USA and international relations but also contributed to a surge of Islamic radicalism in Saudi Arabia. This was a result not only of the presence of US troops in the kingdom, as highlighted by bin Laden, but also due to a growing realisation that the function of Saudi Arabia's *ulema* was and is overwhelmingly to underpin and explain away the unearned and unrepresentative dominance of the ruling king, his extended family and parasitic entourage.

A dozen years after 9/11 and 20 years since the publication of Huntington's article, what now do we know about the 'clash of civilisations'? Huntington did note in his article that he was aware of differences of opinion and outlook *within* 'civilisations' but he appeared to think this was much less important than an apparently clear 'clash' of values norms, and beliefs which for him characterised the division 'between' the 'West' and 'Islam'. It is clear – to me, at least – that the very idea of a world divided into 'seven, or eight major civilizations' (p. 25) is absurd. (In parenthesis, as it were, the very idea that there is 'possibly [an] African civilization' (*ibid.*) is belied by current events in Mali: just *one African civilisation*? What, pray tell, would this comprise?) Time has shown, once again, at least to me, that anyone who can possibly take seriously the idea of a world divided into 'seven, or eight major civilizations' lacks capacity to have any possible understanding of our fascinating mosaic of a world filled with myriad ideas, norms, beliefs and conceptions of how the world is.

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