

“The Clash of Civilizations: A Theological Perspective”

“Civilizations are the ultimate human tribes,
and the clash of civilizations is tribal conflict on a global scale.”
Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 207.

"Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste;
and any city or house divided against itself shall not stand." -Matt. 12:25

Should I be asked . . . whether I would propose the West, such as it is today, as a model to my
country (the Soviet Union), I would frankly have to answer negatively.
No, I could not recommend your society as an ideal for the transformation of ours.”
Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, “A World Split Apart”
(Commencement Address at Harvard University, June 8, 1978)

“The multitude of nations indicates not only the manifold quality of God’s creative power
but also a judgment, for the disorder in the international world, which our narrator
[of Genesis 10-11] regards as the sad conclusion, was not willed by God but is punishment
for the sinful rebellion against God.
Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, 152.

Introduction

On more than one occasion, President George W. Bush has described the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as fostering “a monumental battle of good versus evil.” In this battle, there has been no doubt in his mind (or in ours) regarding who is on the side of good and who is on the side of evil. Though some have winced at the President’s use of such absolute moral terms to portray the tragic events of that fateful day, others have applauded his courageous use of such unfashionable discourse as entirely appropriate, even suggesting that it implies the demise of the cultural scourge of postmodern moral relativism.¹

Another important way, not entirely unrelated, of interpreting what transpired on 9/11 is to explain the attack of Islamic extremists on the United States of America as a manifestation of a “clash of civilizations.” At the center of this way of looking at these unprecedented events has been an article and book both authored by the noted Harvard professor of political science, Samuel P.

¹ For example, see Gene Edward Veith, “Reality in the Rubble: The Fall of the Twin Towers Heralds the Collapse of Postmodernism,” *World Magazine*, October 13, 2001.

Huntington.² In the summer 1993 edition of the journal *Foreign Affairs*, Huntington argued that world politics was entering a new phase after the end of the Cold War, and that tensions between civilizations, as the highest cultural groupings of people, would dominate the global scene. He explains the article's thesis in these words.

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.³

According to the editors of *Foreign Affairs*, Huntington's article generated more response over a three year period than any other article they had published since the 1940s. Given the interest in, as well as the controversy over and misrepresentation of his article, Huntington decided that the prudent thing to do would be to expand it into a book-length treatment in which he would explore more deeply and document more thoroughly the thesis he propounded in his article. So the outcome was a 1996 book titled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*.⁴ In this work conceived as "an interpretation of the evolution of global politics after the Cold War," Huntington aspires, as he says, "to present a framework, a paradigm, for viewing global politics that will be meaningful to scholars and useful to policymakers."⁵ Its central theme is virtually identical to that of his article, namely "that culture and cultural identities, which at

² Huntington is the Albert J. Weatherhead III University Professor at Harvard University where he is also the director of the John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies and the chairman of the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies. He was the director of security planning for the National Security Council in the Carter administration, the founder and co-editor of the journal *Foreign Policy*, and the president of the American Political Science Association.

³ Samuel P. Huntington, "Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993).

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, A Touchstone Book, 1996).

⁵ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 13.

the broadest level are civilizational identities, are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world.”⁶ Because much in this book reads like a veritable prophecy written some five years in advance of September 11, and because this work has been at the center of discussions trying to make sense of these recent events, I have set for myself the task in this paper of providing an overview of some of its chief insights and of offering a brief theological perspective on what he has to say.

Competing Paradigms of Post-Cold War Geopolitics⁷

As Huntington says, his goal is to present “a framework, a paradigm” of global politics in the post-Cold war era, and as he rightly notes, “the test is whether it provides a more meaningful and useful lens through which to view international developments than any alternative paradigm.”⁸ Indeed, there are alternative paradigms that compete with Huntington’s civilizational model in an attempt to explain what is going on in our world today. So, before I elaborate on Huntington’s proposal, let me first sketch four other ways thoughtful observers understand the dynamics of contemporary global politics.

The “End of History,” One World, Euphoria, and Harmony Model

One widely held perspective was that the end of the Cold War meant the end of significant conflict in global politics and the advent of one relatively harmonious world. Known as the “end of history” thesis, proponent Francis Fukuyama argued in Hegelian-like terms that, “We may be witnessing the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human

⁶ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 20.

⁷ This section is taken entirely from Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 31-35. Citations supporting each position are taken from Huntington as well.

⁸ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 14.

government.”⁹ Conflicts about how to order human life may linger on in out-of-the-way third world countries, or among left-over Marxist-Leninist thinkers in obscure locations (Cambridge, Massachusetts?), but overall the war of ideas has ended and liberal democracy has triumphed. The future will not witness any more fundamental ideological battles, but will be devoted primarily to solving various mundane technical and economic problems. In this “new world order,” forming partnerships as well as pursuing and maintaining peace would be the primary concerns. Euphoria reigns as liberal democracy takes over the world!

However, the euphoria over the end of history thesis and the harmony of a unified world was short-lived. It was soon eclipsed by the phenomenon of ethnic conflicts and cleansings, the break down of law and order, the conflicts among states, the resurgence of neo-communist and neo-fascist movements, the intensification of religious fundamentalisms, the breakdown of diplomacy with Russia, the assertiveness of China, and the specter of genocide in several locations throughout the world. In short, the end of history thesis and the triumph of liberal democracy worldwide is simply contrary to reality and therefore is not a helpful way to interpret geo-politics in the post Cold War world.

The Two Worlds “Us vs. Them” Model

The tendency to divide the human world into two fundamental realms—us vs. them, in-group vs. out-group, civilized vs. barbarian, city of God vs. city of man, etc.—as a basis for explaining human political relationships is as old as civilization itself. Muslims, for example, have traditionally divided the world into *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb*, the abode of peace and the abode of war. This method has had its advocates in the post-cold war era as well, dividing the planet in several ways, including “zones of peace” (the West and Japan, or 15% of the world’s population) and “zones of turmoil (everyone else),”¹⁰ the rich North and

⁹ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History,” *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989): 4.

¹⁰ Max Singer and Aaron Wildavsky, *The Real World Order: Zones of Peace, Zones of Turmoil* (Chatham, New Jersey: Chatham House, 1993).

the poor South, or the distinctive cultural entities of the West and East. While these basic distinctions may reflect reality to a certain extent, the alleged homogeneity of war zones and peace zones, rich hemispheres and poor hemispheres, as well as a culturally unified Orient and Occident simply breaks down upon closer examination. Western nations fight with each other; not everyone in the North is rich; economic development is taking place in the South; the East is not unified religiously or culturally, and Western civilization is in the process of unraveling. Hence, this dichotomy model that posits relatively well defined cultural divisions just does not adequately explain the immense complexity of today's world.

184 States, More or Less

A third paradigm is called the “realist” theory of international relations and it suggests that states are the most important entities in world politics. The state of states is one of anarchy, and in order to insure their survival and security, they must either enhance their own national power, or form strategic alliances with other states (NATO, for example), or do both. In any case, states are and likely will remain the key players in world-affairs. Therefore the interests and actions of states—184 of them more or less—is perhaps the best way to understand the future of global affairs, and is certainly an improvement on the one and two world paradigms examined previously.

However, states are not one dimensional, and all of them do not base their actions on raw power as this model specifies. In fact, many states define themselves and pursue their interests in the world in terms of religion, language, culture, tradition, and other institutions, factors that this model fails to take into consideration. Furthermore, states are indeed important, but their importance has diminished recently because of the influence of international organizations like the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and so on. States also have trouble controlling the flow of money, ideas, goods, and people in and out of their borders, and consequently have become quite amorphous. They have also suffered a considerable loss of power to sub-state, regional, and

local interests, creating considerable autonomy and loss of political cohesion. Finally, if nothing else, the statist model has been around a long time, and offers very little innovation for interpreting international relations after the Cold War.

Sheer Chaos or Anarchy Model

The break down of nation-states and the reality of “failed states” establish a basis for a “world in anarchy” as a fourth model for interpreting geo-politics today. This view stresses (1) the breakdown of governmental authority, (2) the breakup of states, (3) the intensification of tribal, ethnic, and religious conflict, (4) the emergence of international criminal mafias, (5) the plight of refugees numbering in the tens of millions, (6) the proliferation of nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction, (7) the spread of terrorism, (8) genocides, massacres, and ethnic cleansings, and so on. The titles of two recent books certainly capture the essence of this rather despairing view of our contemporary situation. One is Zbigniew Brzezinski’s *Out of Control* published in 1993, and the other is Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s *Pandaemonium* published that same year.¹¹

Indeed, this chaos or anarchy model maintains a close connection to reality, highlighting the crucial changes that have transpired in the world since the end of the Cold War. As my own dad said recently while watching a particularly disturbing edition of the nightly news, “There sure seems to be a lot of chicanery going on in the world these days.” Yet, while the world is in considerable disarray, it is not in total disarray or chaos, for some semblance of order does remain. Furthermore, the image of a world spinning totally out of control provides very few clues for understanding it, other than it is out of control. This model offers little insight into how to order, interpret, evaluate, and predict events. It does not help observers to distinguish between levels or kinds of chaos and their causes and consequences. It provides bureaucrats with little guidance for their policy-making responsibilities.

¹¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Out of Control: Global Turmoil on the Eve of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Scribner, 1993); Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Pandaemonium: Ethnicity in International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Therefore, since the (1) one world euphoria and harmony model, (2) the two world 'us vs. them' model, (3) the 184 states, more or less model, and (4) the sheer chaos and anarchy model fail, Huntington propounds his civilizational thesis as the best way for understanding geo-political dynamics today. What are its essential features?

The Clash of Civilizations Model¹²

In the aftermath of the Cold War, and indeed for the very first time in human history, global politics has become multi-civilizational. However, the global scene has not always been this way, at least not until now. For the better part of human history, contacts between civilizations were virtually non-existent, or at best intermittent. Then with the advent of the modern period around A.D.1500, global politics took on two basic forms. First of all, for about four hundred years to the twentieth century, geopolitics was *multipolar* in nature. The nation states of the West—primarily Britain, Spain, Austria, Prussia, Germany, and the United States—interacted and fought with each other, and at the same time colonized and conquered (or at least decisively influenced) every other civilization in the world. International politics, in other words, was both an intra- and extra-civilizational affair. Second, in the period following World War II, global relationships were essentially *bipolar* in nature. It consisted essentially of an ideological, political, economic, and occasionally military struggle between two superpowers, “a group of mostly wealthy and democratic societies, led by the United States” and “a group of somewhat poorer communist societies associated with and led by the Soviet Union.”¹³ Interestingly enough, much of the combat between these two imperiums transpired over third world countries that were most often poor, politically unstable, recently liberated, and unaligned with either capitalism or communism. Then came the collapse of the communist world in the late 1980s, and this bipolar global arrangement soon became obsolete. Taking

¹² The material in this section is based on material from both Huntington's article and book.

¹³ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 21.

its place, in Huntington's estimation, is a political order governed not by Cold War sympathies, but rather by cultures and civilizations. He writes:

In the post-Cold War world, the most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political, or economic. They are cultural. Peoples and nations are attempting to answer the most basic question humans can face: Who are we? And they are answering that question in the traditional way human beings have answered it, by reference to the things that mean most to them. People define themselves in terms of ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs, and institutions. They identify with cultural groups: tribes, ethnic groups, religious communities, nations, and at the broadest level, civilizations.¹⁴

As Huntington puts it in his article, in a world dominated by class and ideological conflicts, the key question is "Which side are you on," but in a global situation where cultures and civilizations are paramount, the critical inquiry is rather, "What are you?"¹⁵

Now Huntington carefully nuances his argument by making several important points. First, he notes that the forces of integration in the world are very real, that the world itself is shrinking and becoming one, and this is precisely what is generating the counterforces of cultural assertion and civilizational consciousness. Ultimate human tribes simply do not want to be sucked into the vortex of some kind of universal civilization, especially one primarily Western in character. Second, there is some legitimate sense in which the world is divisible into two parts, and the distinction to be made is between the West as the dominant civilization and all the others that actually have very little in common with each other. The world, in other words, is divided between the West and the rest, a Western one and a non-Western many. Third, nation states will remain the primary actors in the world community. But their interests, associations, and conflicts will be increasingly shaped by cultural and civilizational concerns, since these, and not other factors, are at the heart of human identity. Fourth, while the world is dominated these days by its fair share of strife and anarchy, the conflicts that pose the greatest threat to peace are those between nation states from

¹⁴ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 21.

¹⁵ Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?"

different civilizations. In fact, Huntington does not hesitate to suggest in his article that "The next world war, if there is one, will be a war between civilizations."¹⁶ And Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in his celebrated Harvard commencement address a few years back, adds the sobering thought that "The next war (which does not have to be an atomic one; I do not believe it will be) may well bury Western civilization forever."¹⁷

Other thinkers seem to share Huntington's essential thesis. Vaclav Havel has stated that "Cultural conflicts are increasing and are more dangerous today than at any time in history." Jacques Delors agrees, stating that "future conflicts will be sparked by cultural factors rather than economics or ideology."¹⁸ Even in the early 1950s as the Cold War was just getting under way, the Canadian statesman Lester Pearson predicted that "the most far-reaching problems arise no longer between nations within a single civilization but between civilizations themselves."¹⁹ Also, Fernand Braudel makes a wise assessment of the global situation when he writes these words.

As far as anyone interested in the contemporary world is concerned, and even more so with regard to anyone wishing to act within it, it "pays" to know how to make out, on a map of the world, which civilizations exist today, to be able to define their orders, their centers and peripheries, their provinces and the air one breathes there, the general and particular "forms" existing and associating with them. Otherwise, what catastrophic blunders of perspective could ensue.²⁰

So then, let's take Braudel's advice seriously, and reproduce Huntington's list of the eight or so civilizations prevalent today (see the map in the appendix):

¹⁶ Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?"

¹⁷ Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *A World Split Apart: Commencement Address Delivered at Harvard University June 8, 1978* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 45, 47.

¹⁸ Vaclav Havel, "The New Measure of Man," *New York Times*, July 8, 1994, A27. Jacques Delors, "Questions Concerning European Security," Address, International Institute for Strategic Studies, Brussels, September 10, 1993, p. 2.

¹⁹ Lester B. Pearson, *Democracy in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 82-83.

²⁰ Fernand Braudel, *On History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 210-211.

(1) *Sinic* civilization designates the common culture of China and the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, and the related cultures of Vietnam and Korea; (2) *Japanese* civilization, though an offspring of Chinese culture, is recognized as its own distinct reality, though relatively small in geographical scope; (3) *Hindu* civilization existing on the subcontinent of India since 1500 B.C., is acknowledged as the core of Indian culture; (4) *Islamic* civilization, which originated in the seventh century A.D. in the Arabian peninsula from which it has spread extensively, traces its source to Mohammed and the Koran; (5) *Orthodox* civilization is centered in Russia and is separate from Western Christendom as a result of its Byzantine origin and its relative isolation from Western influences such as the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment; (6) *Western* civilization, originating around A.D. 700, is characterized by its classical legacy in Greece and Rome, by Catholicism and Protestantism, by its European languages, by its separation of temporal and spiritual authorities, by its rule of law, by its social pluralism, by its representative political bodies, and by its individualism. It is located primarily in Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Latin America; (7) *Latin American* civilization, although it is an offspring of European civilization and may indeed be a sub-civilization within it, is best recognized as a relatively independent entity given its corporatist, authoritarian culture, its thorough-going Catholicism, its indigenous tribes, its unique political and economic evolution, and its idiosyncratic literatures and languages; (8) *African* civilization, recognized as indistinct by many scholars because of its connection with both Western/Christian and Islamic influences, nonetheless seems to be forming into a distinctive African culture especially in the sub-Saharan region with South Africa as its core state.

Now there are many things that make up a civilization like the ones just cited. A civilization is the overall way of life for a people, a culture writ large consisting of “values, norms, institutions, and modes of thinking to which successive generations in a given society have attached primary importance.”²¹

One thing that Huntington makes very clear, however, is that at the heart of any and every culture and civilization is the issue of religion. “Of all the objective elements which define civilizations,” he writes, “the most important usually is religion.” Indeed, it is “a central defining characteristic of civilizations, and, as Christopher Dawson said, ‘the great religions are the foundations on which the great civilizations rest.’”²² This is a simple historic fact, and can be detected easily in the list above. Furthermore, after centuries of secularization and Freudian denials of the relevance of religion in human life, the revenge of God (*La revanche de Dieu*) and the revival of religion is “one of the dominant social facts of the late 20th century.”²³ This probably means that the cultures and civilizations derived from them will play a much more prominent role on the contemporary world stage, including wars and conflicts between them.

This is one of several reasons why Huntington believes that “the most important conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating these civilizations from one another.”²⁴ What are his other reasons?²⁵ First, it is because differences among civilizations are not only real, they are basic. Cultural differences and their religious foundations are virtually immutable and uncompromisable. They are more profound than political or economic loyalties. Though these differences do not automatically translate into conflict, still in historical perspective, they have in fact generated the most prolonged and violent hostilities. Second, the world is becoming a smaller place, and the unavoidable and frequent interactions among representatives of different civilizations enhances cultural consciousness, sharpens differences, and reconstitutes animosities and conflicts that often times have a deep historic pedigree. Third,

²¹ Adda B. Bozeman, “Civilizations Under Stress,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 51 (Winter 1975): 1.

²² Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 42, 47.

²³ George Weigel, “Religion and Peace: An Argument Complexified,” *Washington Quarterly* 14 (Spring 1991): 27.

²⁴ Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?”

²⁵ Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?”

the global process of modernization and radical social change has produced the phenomenon of religious fundamentalisms (Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic) that seek to preserve old verities and can often foster serious conflict with those who threaten the purity of their cultural and spiritual commitments. Fourth, the escalation of Western influence across the globe has spawned not only a fundamentalist response, but also a “return to the roots” phenomenon. This includes the “re-Asianization” of Japan, the “re-Hinduization” of India, the “re-Islamization” of Moslem countries, and the “re-Russianization” of Russia, to mention just a few. Though perhaps at the summit of its power, the West now confronts many cultures in the world (the global non-Wests) that increasingly have the will, desire, and resources to resist global Westernization as well as the ambition to shape the world in their own images. Consequently, tension and conflict are sure to follow this trend. Finally, economic regionalism is increasing (e.g., European Union, NAFTA, Economic Cooperation Organization, Central American Common Market, etc.), and as a result, civilizational consciousness is increasing within them, and their success as economic units is largely dependent upon a common cultural orientation. This admixture of civilizations and the quest for profitability makes for a volatile world situation. Thus on the basis of these and other reasons, Huntington promotes his fundamental thesis, and throughout his article and book, he documents actual clashes of civilizations that have and are transpiring in the world today.

Of particular interest for us these days is the fact that Huntington focused much of his “clash” analysis on conflicts between Islam and other nations and civilizations including Africa, Bosnia, Sarajevo, Asia, Japan, Israel, and especially the West.²⁶ In what now may appear as prophetic words, he asserted in his 1993 article that the “centuries old conflict between the West and Islam is unlikely to decline. It could become more virulent.” Indeed, he supported the argument of Indian Muslim author M. J. Akbar who stated that the West’s next great

²⁶ Four major sections of the book deal with Islam: (1) The Islamic Resurgence, 109-120; (2) Islam: Consciousness without Cohesion, 174-179; (3) Islam and the West, 209-218; (4) Incidence: Islam’s Bloody Borders, 254-258.

confrontation would definitely come from the Muslim world. And indeed it has. His overall assessment on this religion's historic and recent global role was honest and blunt: "Islam has bloody borders."²⁷

As he reports in his follow-up book, no other single statement in his original article attracted more criticism than this one. He made it on the basis of a casual survey of inter-civilizational conflicts. And he stands by his judgment in his book as well, stating that "quantitative evidence from every disinterested source conclusively demonstrates its validity." Despite the fact that both President Clinton and the present President Bush (#2) have argued that the West (and the rest of the world for that matter) does not have problems with Islam *per se*, but rather with Islamic extremists/terrorists, history for centuries, in Huntington's estimation, demonstrates otherwise. His interesting and extensive analysis by which he establishes his point of view cannot be rehearsed here, but I can provide for you his basic conclusion which is as follows.

In all these places, the relations between Muslims and peoples of other civilizations—Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Hindu, Chinese, Buddhist, Jewish—have been generally antagonistic; most of these relations have been violent at some point in the past; many have been violent in the 1990s. Wherever one looks along the perimeter of Islam, Muslims have problems living peaceably with their neighbors. The question naturally arises as to whether this pattern of late-twentieth century conflict between Muslim and non-Muslim groups is equally true of relations between groups from other civilizations. In fact, it is not. Muslims make up about one-fifth of the world's population but in the 1990s they have been far more involved in intergroup violence than the people of any other civilization. The evidence is overwhelming.²⁸

One very interesting and important fact that Huntington documents, however, is that the West (USA/us) is not without significant blame in provoking Islamic anger. In brief, the roots of Muslim rage can be traced to what they call "gharbzadegi," that is, the "Westoxification" or Western poisoning of Muslim societies. In a much touted 1992 book titled *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*, Fatima Mernissi, a modern liberal Muslim woman (and quite the

²⁷ Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?"

opposite of a bearded, turbaned ayatollah) painted a very unflattering portrait of the West as “militaristic,” “imperialistic,” “terroristic,” (through colonialization), “individualistic,” “powerful and fearful.” As she puts it, the West “alone decides if satellites will be used to educate Arabs or to drop bombs on them. It crushes our potentialities and invades our lives with its imported products and televised movies that swamp the airwaves.... [It] is a power that crushes us, besieges our markets, and controls our merest resources, initiatives, and potentialities. That was how we perceived our situation, and the Gulf War turned our perception into certitude.”²⁹ Along these same lines, Huntington explains why many Muslims hate the USA/us in these convicting words that describes the arrogance, materialism, secularism, brutality, and decadence of a West in decline.

Muslims fear and resent Western power and the threat which this poses to their society and beliefs. They see Western culture as materialistic, corrupt, decadent, and immoral. They also see it as seductive, and hence stress all the more the need to resist its impact on their way of life. Increasingly, Muslims attack the West not for adhering to an imperfect, erroneous religion (Christianity), which is nonetheless a “religion of the book,” but for not adhering to any religion at all. In Muslim eyes Western secularism, irreligiosity, and hence immorality are worse evils than the Western Christianity that produced them. In the Cold War the West labeled its opponent “godless communism”; in the post-Cold War conflict of civilizations Muslims see their opponent as “the godless West.”³⁰

This ought to give us something to think about. Just what kind of civilization has the West become? How did it get this way? What role has the Church and the Christian faith played or not played in its recent development? How has Western culture shaped me and how have I shaped it? Is it a model civilization worth emulating in other countries? Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his June 8, 1978, commencement address at Harvard University said: “Should I be asked . . . whether I would propose the West, such as it is today, as a model to my country [the Soviet Union], I would frankly have to answer negatively. No, I

²⁸ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 256.

²⁹ Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1992), 146-147.

³⁰ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 213-214.

could not recommend your society as an ideal for the transformation of ours.”³¹ Why is Solzhenitsyn unwilling to recommend Western culture as a model for his own? His answer is because he was/is convinced that it is in a severe state of moral and spiritual decline. Many others have been saying this and are continuing to say this even today (Jim Nelson Black, *When Nations Die*; Harold O. J. Brown, *The Sensate Culture: Western Civilization Between Chaos and Transformation*; James Burnham, *The Suicide of the West*; Jacques Ellul, *The Betrayal of the West*; Charles Colson with Ellen Vaughn, *Against the Night: Living in the New Dark Age*; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*; Os Guinness, *The American Hour; The Dust of Death*; Carl F. H. Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization*; John Lukacs, *The End of the Twentieth Century and the End of the Modern Age*; Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?*; Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*; Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction*; Pitirim Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age*).

Huntington as well thinks that the West is undergoing a significant process of internal decay and its very continuation is questionable (“The Fading of the West,” as he calls it in chapter four). Though civilizations are blinded by the mirage of immortality and think they will live forever, the verdict of history is to the contrary. The West will be no exception to this universal law of the demise of cultures. Though it has been unique in some ways, it will not last forever. In addition to economic and demographic symptoms of its downfall (low growth in money and people), the following often-invoked signs point to the moral decline, cultural suicide and political disintegration of the West.

1. Increase in antisocial behavior, such as crime, drug use, and violence, generally;
2. Family decay, including increased rates of divorce, illegitimacy, teenage pregnancy, and single-parent families;
3. At least in the United States, a decline in “social capital,” that is, membership in voluntary associations and the interpersonal trust associated with such membership;

³¹ Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *A World Split Apart: Commencement Address Delivered at Harvard University, June 8, 1978* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 33.

4. General weakening of the “work ethic” and rise of a cult of personal indulgence;
5. Decreasing commitment to learning and intellectual activity, manifested in the United States in lower levels of scholastic achievement.³²

While many thinkers have suggested spatial analogies (e.g., Gibbon’s rise, decline, fall) or organic metaphors (Spengler’s birth, growth, decay, death) to describe the development and demise of civilizations, it is interesting that the Bible eschews such models. Instead, it employs a theological framework for analyzing the same phenomenon, namely, the doctrines of idolatry and judgment. As Herbert Schlossberg has pointed out, rebellion against God accompanied by a turning to idols along with commensurate moral failures brings nations to their end in divine judgment. “With their silver and gold,” proclaimed the prophet Hosea, “they made idols for their own destruction” (Hosea 8: 4).³³ Has the West come to this impasse? Has it brought upon itself a similar end in replacing God with humanistic autonomy, by worshipping the idols of the self, science, technology and money, and by corrupting itself in a cesspool of immorality, indulgence and decadence? A very serious question mark, therefore, hangs over the future of the West. Whether it will fall or rise again, whether it will die or be revived, and whether it will be judged or repent remains to be seen. It is hard to overemphasize, without sounding hysterical, the role of the Church and her Christian educational agencies in a time and context such as this!

So what, then, is the overall message of Huntington’s proposal? Here is his own succinct synopsis.

In sum, the post—Cold War world is a world of seven or eight major civilizations. Cultural commonalities and differences shape the interests, antagonisms, and associations of states. The most important countries in the world come overwhelmingly from different civilizations. The local conflicts most likely to escalate into broader wars are those between groups and states from different civilizations. The predominant patterns of political and economic development differ from civilization to civilization. The key issues on the international agenda involve differences among

³² Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 304.

³³ Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction: Christian Faith and Its Confrontation with American Society* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983), 4-6.

civilizations. Power is shifting from the long predominant West to non-Western civilizations. Global politics has become multipolar and multicivilizational.³⁴

If it is true that "Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself shall not stand," (Matt. 12: 25), then how can we best get along in a world so divided by civilizations? Huntington concludes his book with this piece of timely advice in the final sentence: "In the emerging era, clashes of civilizations are the greatest threat to world peace, and an international order based on civilizations is the surest safeguard against world war."³⁵

A Theological Perspective

How shall Christians think about Huntington's ideas? How might we put them into a Christian context and think about them in a biblical way? I would like to set forth just a few theological propositions for our consideration as we close.

First of all, when God created all things and placed human beings as His image and likeness on the earth, He intended for them to establish a rich, creative human culture characterized by righteousness, harmony, peace, and love. The creation and development of culture is grounded in and an expression of human nature as *imago Dei*. Its pursuit is essential to human fulfillment and blessing. And it stands at the center of God's purposes in history and is ultimately for His greater glory and for human good. Therefore, the process of civilizing and humanizing the earth by a unified human race carried out under divine wisdom and authority is nothing less than the will and gift of God, the source of joy, celebration and blessing, and the proper motivation for gratitude.

Second, however, with the advent of sin into the world, human relationships and cultural life were disrupted severely. Violence quickly erupted in the form of fratricide (Cain murders his brother Abel). Also an early apostate civilization developed, characterized culturally by secular city-building and

³⁴ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 29.

humanistic technological pursuits, and spiritually and morally by pride and immorality (e.g., Lamech's taunt song and bigamy). These stories found in Genesis 4 manifest the initial perversion of God's good cultural purposes for man, and the origin of idolatrous, anthropocentric civilizations in their progressive degeneracy and alienation from God. This particular Cain/Lamech civilization of wickedness eventually falls when it receives its just divine punishment in the waters of the flood (Gen. 6-9).

Third, the deep fragmentation of the human race into conflicting, hostile civilizations is directly attributed to God's judgment of a second great apostasy at the tower of Babel through linguistic confusion and global dispersion (Gen. 11: 1-9). Though the human race received a fresh start after the flood through the covenant with Noah, it did not take long before it gathered itself in titanic pride and self-assertion on a plain in Shinar against the will of God. The Table of Nations in Genesis 10 where the sons of Noah are presented in their ethnic, linguistic, social, cultural, and geographical divisions should be seen as an expression of divine judgment on human sin. Civilizations take their rise in human rebellion and the response of divine judgment. As Old Testament theologian Gerhard von Rad states, "The multitude of nations indicates not only the manifold quality of God's creative power but also a judgment, for the disorder in the international world, which our narrator [of Genesis 10-11] regards as the sad conclusion, was not willed by God but is punishment for the sinful rebellion against God."³⁶ The apocryphal book 2 Esdras 3: 7-12 describes this situation well, beginning with a reference to Adam and the historic results of his sin.

From him [Adam] there sprang nations and tribes, peoples and clans, without number. And every nation walked after its own will and did ungodly things before thee [God] and scorned thee, and thou didst not hinder them. But again, in its time thou didst bring the flood upon upon the inhabitants of the world and destroy them. And the same fate befell them: as death came upon Adam, so the flood upon them. But thou didst leave one of them, Noah with his household, and all the righteous who have descended from him. When those who dwelt upon the earth began to

³⁵ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 321.

³⁶ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, rev. ed., The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972). 152.

multiply, they produced children and peoples and many nations, and again they began to be more ungodly than were their ancestors.

As this same text concludes a few verses later, “Thou [God] may indeed find individual men who have kept thy commandments, *but nations thou wilt not find*” (2 Esdras 3: 36, italics added).

Fourth, from these beginnings in the narrative of the advent, spread and escalation of sin in Genesis 4-11, human existence has been characterized by different cultures and civilizations and the interactions and conflicts between them. Human cultural life, as we have seen, was grounded in our spiritual nature as God’s image and was designed to be service to humanity and glory to God. Civilization grows out of religious roots grounded deeply in the soil of the human heart. But when sin entered the world, that human religious impulse was corrupted, and as a direct result, so too were human cultures and civilizations which are derived from it. Even in a perverted form, human identity individually and corporately is based primarily upon an essential spiritual orientation, and its concomitant cultural expression in a system of values and way of life. Because of the central importance of these realities in defining human life, it is no wonder, then, that they are vital in human affairs and are cherished, protected, promoted and defended even to the point of death. Therefore, the fact of diverse religions as the most significant sources of ourselves and of our cultures explains why we all can’t just get along. The Scriptures present a warfare worldview. For, indeed, if the world looks like a battlefield, that is because it is one in the conflict between religious perspectives, the struggle between worldviews, and the clash of civilizations.

Fifth and finally, redemption in Jesus Christ is able to overcome these fundamental religious differences and cultural barriers, uniting true believers into one Christian body and thus establishing peace. Sin fractured the human race, salvation reunites it. Part of the glory of the gospel is that “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3: 28). Jesus’ purpose as He described it in John 10: 16 was to bring all the people of God together as “one flock with

one Shepherd.” And He also prayed in His high priestly prayer in John 17 that all believers may be one just as He and the Father are one. The day of Pentecost also manifests the unifying purpose of the kingdom of God as a reversal of the linguistic and cultural judgment at the tower of Babel when representatives of a multitude of nations and languages were able to hear Spirit inspired discourse in their own tongues under the influence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. No wonder, then, that Paul could write: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” And finally, even the twenty-four elders and four living creatures who stand before the throne of God in heaven disclose the universal intent of the gospel and the reunion of all people of genuine faith in the kingdom of God when they sing praises to the crucified Christ in these words:

Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. "And Thou hast made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth" (Rev. 5: 9-10).

Hence, as an indication of this present and future glory of a restored humanity in Jesus Christ, the Church holds the antidote to the clash of civilizations. She ought to endeavor to be a testimony and witness to the kind of human reconciliation that stands out in sharp relief in a day marked by hatred and disagreement. “If the world has not approached its end,” Solzhenitsyn writes, “it has reached a major watershed in history, equal in importance to the turn from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. It will demand from us a spiritual blaze; we shall have to rise to a new height of vision, to a new level of life....”³⁷ In these tumultuous, conflicted days, therefore, perhaps the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi provides a basis for that blaze, that vision, and that life. Let us pray and live it out with a sincere heart with a view to God’s glory in the restoration of humankind

³⁷ Solzhenitsyn, “A World Split Apart,” 59, 61.

and the renewal of the earth in an age of a tremendous battle between good and evil and the clash of civilizations.

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
And where there is sadness, joy.
O divine Master, grant that I may seek
not so much to be consoled, as to console.
To be understood, as to understand.
To be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.