

The Clash of Civilizations

Introduction

In the summer of 1993, Samuel Huntington published an article entitled "The Clash of Civilizations?" in the journal *Foreign Affairs*. The article generated more controversy than any other article in the journal since the 1940s. And Huntington says it stirred up more debate than anything else he wrote during that time.

Three years later Samuel Huntington published a book using a similar title. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* came on the market in 1996 and became a bestseller, once again stirring controversy. Given the events of the last year, it seems worthy to revisit his comments and predictions, since in many ways he seems as accurate as an Old Testament prophet.

His thesis is fairly simple. In the future, world history will be marked by conflicts between three principal groups: western universalism, Muslim militancy, and Chinese assertion.

Huntington says that in the post-Cold War world, "global politics has become multipolar and multicivilizational." {1} During most of human history, major civilizations were separated from one another and contact was intermittent or nonexistent. That pattern changed in the modern era (around 1500 A.D.). For over 400 years, the nation states of the West (Britain, France, Spain, Austria, Prussia, Germany, and the United States) constituted a multipolar international system that interacted, competed, and fought wars with each other. During that same period of time, these nations also expanded, conquered, and colonized nearly every other civilization.

During the Cold War, global politics became bipolar, and the world was divided into three parts. Western democracies led by the United States engaged in ideological, political, economic, and even military competition with communist countries led by the Soviet Union. Much of this conflict occurred in the Third World outside these two camps and was composed mostly of nonaligned nations.

Huntington argues that in the post-Cold War world, the principal actors are still the nation states, but they are influenced by more than just power and wealth. Other factors like cultural preferences, commonalities, and differences are also influential. The most important groupings are not the three blocs of the Cold War, but rather the major world civilizations.

To put it simply, the line has moved. For 45 years, the Iron Curtain was the central dividing line in Europe. "That line has moved several hundred miles east. It is now the line separating the peoples of western Christianity, on the one hand, from Muslims and Orthodox peoples on the other." {2}

So in this article we are going to describe and analyze Samuel Huntington's worldview of global politics in order to understand better the profound changes taking place in the 21st century.

Worldviews of Global Politics

In essence, Huntington is proposing a new worldview in the area of foreign policy. He argues that "worldviews and causal theories are indispensable guides to international politics." {3}

Huntington says that the post-Cold war world is a different world with a different set of issues and conflicts. "In this new world the most pervasive, important, and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between people

belonging to different cultural entities.” {4} World history, he believes, will be marked by conflicts between three principal groups already mentioned: western universalism, Muslim militancy, and Chinese assertion.

Huntington’s worldview stands in contrast to four other prominent perspectives that have been proposed to understand global politics. The view of Francis Fukuyama sees world events culminating in what he calls “the end of history.” He believes that we may be witnessing the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the acceptance of western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. Although first proposed at the end of the Cold War when a harmonious globalism seemed likely, there is little evidence that the war of ideas and ideologies is coming to an end as the events of the last year clearly demonstrate.

A second view is one of *us versus them*. “People are always tempted to divide people into us and them, the in-group and the other, our civilization and those barbarians. Scholars have analyzed the world in terms of the Orient and the Occident, North and South, center and periphery. Muslims have traditionally divided the world into *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar a-Harb*, the abode of peace and the abode of war.” {5}

A third perspective could be called “184 states, more or less.” According to this view, nation states are the primary (even the sole) actors on the world stage. Each state seeks power and wealth in the midst of anarchy. And while this is a somewhat accurate view of the world, it does not provide any model for understanding global politics.

A fourth and final view is one of chaos. This perspective is illustrated by the book titles “Out of Control” by Zbigniew Brzezinski and “Pandaemonium” by Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Recent history is replete with examples of the breakup of states, the loss of governmental authority, and numerous regional conflicts. But, as a model, this view provides little predictive value and also does not completely match reality. The world stage may be full of chaos but its not totally without order and direction.

Samuel Huntington’s worldview, I believe, provides a better perspective on the world of the 21st century.

Major Contemporary Civilizations

Let’s dedicate our attention to what separates these civilizations. The first is the Chinese civilization which dates back to at least 1500 B.C. He describes this as a Sinic civilization in order to describe not only China and Chinese civilization, but also the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and related cultures of Vietnam and Korea.

The second is Japanese to separate it from the Chinese culture. Most scholars recognize it as a separate entity that was an offspring of China, emerging between 100 and 400 A.D.

The third civilization is Hindu, which has existed on the Subcontinent since at least 1500 B.C. This is also referred to as Indian, Indic, or Hindu. One scholar says that Hindu is “more than a religion or a social system; it is the core of Indian civilization.” {6}

The fourth is a distinct Islamic civilization which originated in the Arabian peninsula in the seventh century A.D. Islam rapidly spread across North Africa and the Iberian peninsula and also eastward into central Asia, the Subcontinent, and Southeast Asia.

A fifth civilization is a separate Orthodox civilization, centered in Russia and separate from western

Christendom as a result of its Byzantine parentage. It also has limited exposure to the Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, and other central western experiences.

Western civilization would be a sixth entity dated as emerging about 700-800 A.D. Scholars generally view it as having three major components (Europe, North America, and Latin America).

A seventh civilization would be Latin America, which has a distinct identity even though it emanates from the West. It has had a corporatist, authoritarian culture and has been primarily Catholic.

Two other civilizations could be added to this list. These would be an African civilization in the south of the continent. The north and east coasts belong to Islamic civilization, but some scholars recognize a distinct African culture on the rest of the continent.

Also, a Buddhist culture could be defined. Although it did not survive in the country of its birth, it has been exported to other countries and regions in the East.

Samuel Huntington argues that in this post-Cold War world, people will identify themselves in terms of their ancestry and heritage. Ultimately they define themselves according to their civilization.

Culture and Civilizations

Samuel Huntington argues that in this new era as people identify themselves in terms of their ancestry and heritage, it will create a clash of civilizations. He says, "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." [\[7\]](#)

This is not surprising. We all tend to identify ourselves according to our culture, which includes our political, cultural, and religious heritage. In previous centuries, the major world civilizations were separated from each other. Contact was either non-existent or intermittent. Our global society has put us in contact with each other in ways never before experienced in our history. Cultural differences, therefore, should have a profound effect on how we interact.

Samuel Huntington says, "In the post-Cold War world, culture is both a divisive and unifying force. People separated by ideology but united by culture come together, as the two Germanys did and as the two Koreas and the several Chinas are beginning to. Societies united by ideology or historical circumstance but divided by civilization either come apart, as did the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Bosnia, or are subjected to intense strain, as is the case with Ukraine, Nigeria, Sudan, India, Sri Lanka, and many others." [\[8\]](#)

We should note that cultures and civilizations are not static but do change and evolve. And nations rise and fall. Most go through somewhat predictable stages and respond to challenges and opportunities.

Nation states will still remain important actors in global politics, but their interests and conflicts will become increasingly shaped by cultural forces and interactions between the major contemporary civilizations.

Samuel Huntington provides a compelling worldview for understanding the future of global politics

as well as understanding the philosophical and spiritual interaction and conflict between Christianity and Islam. I believe that Christians need to begin to understand the implications of this major shift in countries and civilizations as we move into the 21st century.

Implications for Christians

The implications of this perspective on missions is profound. In the past, countries that were closed to the gospel tended to be communist countries. Even so, there was still a significant amount of Christian growth in countries behind the Iron Curtain and Bamboo Curtain. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, many of these countries are more open to the gospel than ever before. Meanwhile, persecution of Christians remains in China.

But a new phenomenon has emerged. Muslim countries are now the most resistant to the message of Christianity. Mission work is limited or even non-existent in many of these Muslim countries. This, I believe, represents the greatest challenge for missions in the 21st century: reaching the Muslim world for Christ. Already there are a billion Muslims in the world, making Islam the second largest religion in the world and one of the fastest growing.

A second implication is related to the first. Samuel Huntington predicts a growing conflict between western universalism and Muslim militancy. In other words, the conflict is between liberal western democracies and their cultures and Muslim countries.

This presents a major challenge for Christians trying to reach Muslims. When they see the West with its immorality and decadence, they reject it and Christianity. After all, they reason, these are Christian countries and this is what they produce.

As Christians, I believe it is crucial that we make a distinction between Christianity and western society. The political conflict may be between western democracies and Muslim militancy, but the spiritual battle is between Christianity and Islam. The two are not the same.

I have found it helpful to agree with Muslims about many of these criticisms of western culture. It is disarming, and also provides an opportunity to explain that many western countries (especially in Europe) are anything but Christian countries. Instead, I choose to focus the discussion on the Bible and Jesus Christ as a contrast to the Koran and Muhammed.

Whether we are missionaries overseas or missionaries in our backyard, we need to begin to understand the nature of Islam and bring the message of the gospel to the Muslims we meet. I believe Samuel Huntington is correct in his analysis, and we should begin to understand the changing world around us so that we can be more effective for Christ. I hope that this article and the other materials on the Probe Web Site will be helpful to you in that regard.

Notes

1. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 21.
2. Ibid., 28
3. Ibid., 30
4. Ibid., 28

5. Ibid., 32

6. Fernand Braudel, *On History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 226.

7. Huntington, 21.

8. Ibid., 28.

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