



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“Beyond the *Clash of Civilizations*”

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Abstract

Introduced in the summer of 1993 and expanded in his 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Simon & Schuster, 1996; Touchstone, 1998), Samuel Huntington attempted to forecast the nature of global relations in the post-Cold War world, arguing that conflict in the future would be cultural rather than ideological. Contextualising and revisiting the Huntington thesis one decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the increasing complexity of the “civilisation” is explored by extending beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. Civilisations can no longer be seen as monolithic, unidimensional or static entities that can be easily essentialised. Through dialogue, their diversity should instead be protected and promoted to better understand our shared contributions to humanity’s cultural heritage.

Introducing the Huntington Thesis

We are moving into an age when different civilisations will have to learn to live side-by-side in peaceful interchange, learning from each other, studying each other’s history, and ideals of art and of culture to mutually enrich each other’s lives. The alternative in this overcrowded little world is misunderstanding, tension, clash and catastrophe.

Lester Pearson

Former Prime Minister of Canada and Nobel Peace Prize Recipient (1957)

This quotation comes to us from the 1950s, forty years before Samuel Huntington wrote the book, *Clash Of Civilizations* (Simon & Schuster, 1996; Touchstone, 1998). It is important to understand Huntington’s thesis in the context of Lester Pearson’s statement. Huntington is a scholar of International Affairs and Foreign Policy. His goal was to understand the nature of the world after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the implications that it might have for international affairs. The Cold War had come to an end. The bipolarity that existed because of the long standoff, between the United States and the Soviet Union, had ended. This did not mean the conflict had come to an end or that the world would now be a more homogenous and peaceful place.

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Huntington's analysis reflects another set of dichotomies and polarities that would govern the world, and the *Clash of Civilizations* is centred on these.

In discussing his notion of the *Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington talked about a cluster of civilisations, three of which were particularly important to him. One was, what he called, the Asian civilisational cluster in which he included China, Japan and East Asia. The second was the western cluster by which he meant North America and Western Europe. The third cluster that he refers to is the Islamic World. He used the notion of a 'clash of civilisations' to reflect the potential conflict at a global level that might emerge after the collapse of the Soviet Union and which, in his view, should determine the foreign policy perspectives that should guide not only analysts but also governments. Many objections have been raised to his thesis. Suffice it to say that events, since he wrote, have given us much cause for thought. We have not had clashes between civilisations; rather we have had clashes between smaller groups within the larger context of these civilisations. One cannot dismiss his theory outright, but much of his analyses have significant implications. This presentation seeks to specifically address the role of Muslims in this new framework.

Recasting Civilisation, Revisiting the Role of Islam

There is today a very significant presence of Muslims in Europe. Several million live in France, Germany, Britain and the other countries of Western Europe, in the Russian Federation and the Balkans, in Eastern Europe in places like Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, etc. In Canada and the United States there are approximately six to seven million Muslims.

We cannot any longer have a monolithic notion of western civilisation and culture, if it ever was, primarily because of its own internal diversity. Lest people think that this interaction of Islam with the West is something new, we must remember that it has very ancient roots, and was as much intellectual and cultural, as political and military.

Islam is a faith that regards itself as being connected to the Abrahamic tradition. Muslims believe that God had revealed Himself to every human society and, in that experience, God had revealed Himself to many of the significant figures that are part of Biblical history. Prophet Mohammed, to whom the Qur'an was revealed, came to fulfill the preceding revelations, not to oppose them. Therefore, Islam regards itself as being on this continuum of the Abrahamic tradition in which prophets like Abraham, Moses and Jesus are given a place of significant importance as the main mediators between God and human society. In fact, an important festival in the Muslim calendar, which marks the end of the pilgrimage, also commemorates the sacrifice of Prophet Abraham; the story is famous both in the Bible and the Qur'an.

Over time, since its founding, Islam also became the foundation of many civilisations. It was able to enter into many geographical spaces over time from the Mediterranean, what we today call the Near and Middle East, to Central Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia to Africa. Everywhere that it went, it laid down roots and encouraged the development of significant civilisations. One important bridging role played by Muslims is often forgotten. The entire philosophical heritage, the legacy of Aristotle, Plato, the great Greek philosophers, physicians and scientists, was translated into Arabic in the 9th century at a place called Bait al-Hikma in Baghdad, and that entire corpus was subsequently available to the West in a Latin translation based on the Arabic, not on the original Greek. Many people forget this bridging role that Islam played, which enabled Greek thought and many of the other cultural traditions to pass through Muslim seats of learning and enter the West. This was an important marker of the



open ethos of Muslim learning and represented, in its own time, a sense of belonging to a global heritage.

Islam and Local Cultures

If one looks at Islam from a civilisational point of view, it created opportunities for synthesis with local cultures, to create ways in which learning, art, architecture, music and science could flourish in those societies. They flourished in the languages of the people where that tradition grew, so that in Iran the tradition flourished in Persian, in India in local languages and subsequently in Urdu. In Tajikistan and other parts of Central Asia, it also flourished in their local languages. Arabic remained one of the primary languages that provided the thread, which united all these cultures. But the expression was local and the cultural expressions in architecture, music or art remained particularly sensitive to a synthesis between the local and what had come from the larger Muslim world. That frames for us the way in which Islam played a role in bridging relations between existing cultures and what would emerge as the modern West. Colonisation and war brought these two into conflict. Much of that conflict now spills over into our time, but for a very long period Islam served as a cultural bridge and as a transition between the Mediterranean and the growing civilisation of the West, which was remarkably reflected in the heritage of Spain, for example.

Islam and the Colonial Encounter

The third point about history and Islam is that in modern times that relationship changed for two fundamental reasons. One was colonialism: the overtaking of the majority of the Muslim world by European powers from about the 16th and 17th century onwards. There was virtually no part of the Muslim world that remained untouched by the overflow of European influence, colonialism and expansion. There were countries that escaped maybe direct colonisation and rule, but virtually every part of the Muslim world was touched by the rise of the West.

When these empires and colonial rule were dismantled, they left behind a very fragmented Muslim world. If one wishes to understand a lot of the difficulty, drama, and chaos sometimes in the Muslim world during the last fifty years, we need to understand that period much better. That fragmentation was followed by a time of seeking new unities, which have been hard to come by because those new unities sought to establish nation-states, which in itself was a new idea for the world at large and certainly for the Muslim world in as much as the focus of such a polity became 'national' identity and territory.

The Collapse of the Soviet Union

Let us consider the Balkans. When the Soviet Union collapsed there was a ripple effect through the former satellites of the Soviet Union, such as Yugoslavia and Albania. We are still seeing those problems being worked out. Bosnia was an example, Kosovo was another, where groups have begun to identify themselves in very different ways and those identities very often clash with identities that have a different appropriation of history. But the Muslim presence in that part of the world is not an immigrant presence of recent times. It has been an entrenched presence since the time of the Ottomans, over 500 years ago when people in the region converted to Islam, as many had before them to forms of Christianity. So, all of the clashes which are a result of finding ways to define an identity that is nationalistic, are



actually based on much larger identities that had a civilisational framework — not an ethnic or national framework. The emergence of ethnic and national identities as a political force is a phenomenon of recent provenance within the Balkans, building again upon different histories which go back centuries.

Moving Beyond The *Clash of Civilizations*

In the context of this larger picture, what are the key issues that will move us beyond the *Clash of Civilizations*? Where are the opportunities to build relationships, new clusters that will transcend the potential conflict inherent in the current civilisational order? These questions cannot be answered without asking some very fundamental humanistic questions. These are questions that emerge because of some important changes that need to take place within our own understanding of the nation-state. We have, for a long time, perhaps 200 to 250 years, come to regard the nation-state as a permanent form of existence for ourselves. It is hard to envisage us having political arrangements that do not include nation-states. Yet the forces that dominate our political life today are at cross-purposes with that idea.

One is the growing sense that we need to build larger boundaries that enable us to assure a better economic and civic framework for our future. For example, in this part of the world we have the North American Free Trade Agreement. It is a larger boundary which includes Canada, Mexico, and the United States. That boundary assumes a freer interchange not only of goods but of people — it will be easier for people to move across borders; it will be easier for people to interact with each other; it will be easier to have cultural relations and educational relations as well as economic ones. The fact that the revolution in communications technology has erased our view of boundaries is also an important new reality. The World Wide Web carries not only ideas but also goods and values.

However, there are forces at work that are not very comfortable with such globally emerging frameworks. Regions still matter, regionalism is strong, regional interests are strong, and there is no truly representative sense of what these interests should be, shared across the nation. It is a trend that is evident; and needs to be because it says something about the way people perceive larger boundaries as threatening local identity.

Revisoning Political Arrangements

One wonders, if within the context of Western civilisation at this point in time, we are eventually going to see a rethinking of the idea of the nation-state. Is it possible that in time these larger boundaries will become so much more important, that the idea of simply being English, or Canadian, or even American, will become less significant? If that happens, what does it do to our idea of civilisation? We have been used to constructing civilisation out of perhaps local, geographical place-memories. What happens to those concepts and memories, as we build larger entities, networks and coalitions that bind us politically, legally and economically?

It is likely that we will see a dramatic revision in the way in which our own sense of national belonging and geographical location is going to be disrupted by these larger boundaries. That will change the way we think of ourselves as belonging to any one particular civilisation. The next generation of Muslims born and brought up in Canada may not think of themselves as being only Arab, Malay, Turkish, Indian, Pakistani or East African, but will think of themselves also as Canadian Muslims. It is possible that the distance from the national, ethnic



and geographical location will also reduce the relationship with it. This enlargement of the sense of self is critical to the process of development of the larger human family of which we are all a part.

How does this translate into the fabric of cultural life in a country? The evolution is difficult to predict, but we should keep our minds open. Nobody believed, even 15 years ago, that the Soviet Union would collapse and that newer patterns would emerge to change the equation of relationships in Central Asia. The consequences of that for people in Central Asia and for others will continue to be of significance.

Anchoring Civilisation

Where in such an evolution, do we seek an anchor for our civilisational identity? Where should we be looking? In geography, inherited language, or culture? New technologies? We have all heard of the human genome that has now been mapped. It is as much an achievement as having a map of Canada; it does not tell us anything about Canadians. A map of Canada simply tells us about how physical space is organised and features are identified. It cannot explain Canadian identity. So, where are we going to get those pieces from? Perhaps we can get them from those values and those ways of looking at human life and culture that are deeply rooted beyond geographical boundaries, that are located elsewhere in what we call the human experience. It is ultimately to ourselves that we will have to look to for the moral compass that will allow us to define civilisation for that period. We are called upon to look into our civilisational past and determine what will guide us.

When the Taliban destroyed the statues of Buddha recently, what was hurtful was not that some stone images had been reduced to rubble or that they were getting political mileage out of it. What was more hurtful was that a human ideal, which had been valued in that part of the world for so long, was destroyed. Muslims have been encouraged to maintain strong inter-faith relationships. They are asked to protect other people's culture and heritage, not to destroy it. The same can be said of many others throughout history, including those here in North America, who have destroyed other people's heritage and traditions. But these are not lessons of a clash of civilisations; they are lessons about the elimination of human wisdom and knowledge. That is what we cannot afford to do. If we want to reach beyond the *Clash of Civilizations*, it is not simply about politics; about global clusters and boundaries. It is about ourselves and it is about the moral horizons we set for ourselves throughout history and for today. In the process, it would be wrong to limit ourselves to any single and closed definition of Muslims. We need to accept the reality of pluralism in Islam, as in other civilisations and to reorganise plurality as a condition of all societies.

The Allegory of the Conference of the Birds

There is a work in the Muslim tradition that is very helpful in thinking about these issues. It is a work in Persian, which loosely can be translated as the *Conference of the Birds*. It expresses concerns about analogous issues — human conflict, human distinctions, the meanings of the self in a community. In order to make his point, the work describes how all the birds of the world come together in his allegory. These birds, from different parts of the world, came together under a mediating figure, and they were required to face two questions: What does it mean to be a bird rather than just being a parrot or a swan or a crane? And what is the ultimate reference point for determining whether these birds are living up to their highest values? Many of the birds wanted to leave it to others to figure out the answers. Others felt



that they should all be engaged in this enterprise. Eventually, a number of them decided that it was worth pursuing this inquiry. In order for them to search for answers they had to undertake an allegorical journey through seven valleys and mountains where, at each stage, a partial answer is revealed to them about the nature of their 'birdness'. They must however at the end of the journey seek the Figure who is the source of their quest. Not all of them survive the journey; some of them drop out on the way. Eventually, thirty survive and reach the final stage. They come to the place where they think they are going to be told the answer or they are going to meet their reference point, their teacher, the one who will make sense of everything. They wait and nothing happens. Nobody comes, nobody appears, and they sit together as thirty in a moment of contemplation. The entity they seek is *Simurgh*. It is the name of a mythical bird, the king of birds. When they sit in contemplation and awaken from that contemplation, they looked around and they awaken to a profound act of understanding. The word in Persian for thirty is '*sih*' and the word for bird is '*murgh*'. They are the *Simurgh*. There was no *Simurgh* outside of them. Their experience, their quest, their origin had brought them to their beginning. Similarly, it is through the discovery of our common, shared heritage that we will learn to define our shared humanity.

But first, we need to undertake the journey. We need to reflect and develop a shared vocabulary which is not limited by any civilisation. We have the opportunity to investigate not only the human genome but the map of the human self. That is a difficult journey. It does not happen in any one discipline, it must happen across the University. It will happen in places in between all of the disciplines, where people are forced to talk to each other about issues that are beyond their own discipline or interests. It is hoped that in this spirit, perhaps it may become clearer to us that while we may still face 'clashes of civilisations', our journey together, will move us beyond the idea of 'clash' to one of 'harmony'.