



Hybrid Civilisation or Clash of Civilisations

RETHINKING THE MUSLIM OTHER

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IN 2014, IN THE MIDST of the rise of ISIS, *The Australian* published a frontpage headline that read 'We'll fight Islam [for] 100 years'. In November 2018 the same newspaper, in response to a domestic terror attack in Melbourne, published on its front page the headline 'Violent Islam Strikes Again'. This sense of ongoing conflict with Islam seems perpetual. Islam, to some, represents values, traditions and visions that are at odds with those of the rest of the world.

The Bourke Street attack also produced divisive rhetoric from some Australian politicians, blaming Muslim communities for not doing enough. The rhetoric gave the impression that there is an expectation that Muslims, wherever and whoever, must be held accountable for the conduct of every one of their coreligionists. These are but some recent and local examples of a wider trend of analysts, politicians and even academics invoking the 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis to demonstrate how Islam is incompatible with the modern world.

The thesis was initially developed by Bernard Lewis, a British-American historian based at Princeton University. Lewis died in May 2018 but left a legacy that continues to shape perceptions of the Muslim world. In Lewis's words:

It should by now be clear that we are facing a mood and a movement in Islam far transcending the level of issues

and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilisations.¹

Samuel Huntington developed this idea further, asserting the propensity within Islam for violence. He offered policy advice that recommended limiting the influence of Islam by tightening immigration and curbing minority rights. Huntington vehemently denounced multiculturalism, arguing that it diluted the basic foundations of America. Maintaining Western military superiority over other civilisations, especially Islam, was crucial.²

Following September 11, Huntington's thesis became more relevant than ever. While some saw the event as proof of the thesis' correctness, others with a more nuanced view argued that he had done no more than put forward a self-fulfilling prophecy: US policymakers who adhered to his advice had created an interventionist American foreign policy, which in turn had galvanised anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world and empowered radical elements in Muslim societies.³

The rise of ISIS revived the debate about the thesis. It was not hard for ISIS to excite anger. From the Paris and Orlando terrorist attacks, to the enslavement of Yazidi women under the guise of Islam, to the broadcasted beheadings of prisoners, ISIS provoked renewed international debate over Islam and

▲ 'Aussie' poster by artist Peter Drew on wall in Wolf Lane, Perth. Overlay: Calligraphy of 'Subhan Allah' (Glory be to Allah).

POSTER IMAGE: BY START DIGITAL ON UNSPLASH; CALLIGRAPHY VIA PIXABAY.

its 'shortcomings'. Everything about Islam became scrutinised, and perhaps even more so than in the wake of September 11.

Some, in search for a way to understand the brutality of ISIS, nominate the 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis as an explanation. This thesis would hold that Islam in general is incompatible with Western values, and that ISIS simply adheres to authentic Islam. Those who articulate a different version of Islam are simply downplaying the fundamentally violent and regressive nature of the religion. In 2016 the *Australian Financial Review* was moved for reasons unknown to turn to a former head of the Business Council of Australia for expert theological commentary. Graham Bradley AM in a column for the newspaper criticised Noam Chomsky for rejecting Huntington's thesis. In Bradley's words:

He [referring to Chomsky] and many other critics have been remarkably silent on the atrocities committed by Islamist terrorist groups around the world over the past few years. They too should now reflect on whether Huntington was more right than wrong. And policymakers would do well to revisit Huntington's foresightful essay.⁴

Peculiarly, the 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis is celebrated equally by extremist Muslims. To them the thesis correctly encapsulates their claims that Islam—their version of it, of course—is incompatible with Western values that they consider to be corrupt.

DEFINITIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis provokes obvious definitional questions: what are Western values and what is Western civilisation?

There are obviously many interpretations of what Western civilisation represents. The 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis is simplistic and reductionist. It ignores the nuances within various societies, cultures and nations and instead treats the notion of 'Western civilisation' as self-explanatory. The proponents of the preservation of Western civilisation often have an elusive conception of what

exactly it is that they are trying to protect. It can be argued that if Western civilisation refers to its religious mores and customs, it must include the Middle Eastern traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Christian tradition was shaped in part by Christian scholars in the Middle East who were based in Syrian monasteries, Egyptian Coptic churches and Turkey. Alternatively, if Western civilisation identifies with the achievements of the Roman Empire, the Middle East cannot be excluded as much of the Middle East was part of the Empire. Other proponents of Western civilisation articulate that it is founded upon the achievements of Western Europe. If this is the case, what about the Muslim and Jewish contributions in Spain, in terms of knowledge and scientific development? Just as there is no single interpretation of Islam, there is no one version of Western civilisation or even uniform 'Western values'. Western societies continue to debate socio-political issues such as same-sex marriage, abortion and even secularism. The French notion of secularism differs radically from the American version.

The proponents of the 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis then look at Islam, however defined, as incompatible with the West, however defined. The most extreme elements are taken as representative of the Islamic faith. The vibrant theological and political debates within Islam are ignored. Islam is heavily contested within Muslim societies as lay intellectuals, religious scholars, modernist clerics, secular activists, political Islamists and other actors lay their different claims over Islam. These debates within Islam precede the modern world and continue to colour interactions between Muslims.

CULTURES, TRADITIONS AND VALUES

Lewis, Huntington and others like them are critical of 'Islamic culture and values'. But what is Islamic culture? There are between 1.5 and 1.7 billion Muslims who share different cultures and traditions. Islam in practice differs from one place to another. The thesis not only ignores diversity at any point in time; it treats culture and tradition as static and incapable of changing. Western societies have

clearly changed over time. Western values and culture, whatever they are, are subject to modification and reconstruction. So is Islam. Cultures, values and interpretations of doctrines have evolved. Traditions are modified and constructed. Some are positively developed while others take a regressive turn. This is illustrated in a non-Islamic context in the famous book *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, which examines how societies re-invent traditions for various purposes. Hugh Trevor-Roper's chapter in the book discusses the Highland tradition of Scotland as a modern construct developed to assert identity in the context of the union with England. The kilt was long regarded by the large majority of Scotsmen, in his words, 'as a sign of barbarism: the badge of roguish, predatory, blackmailing Highlanders who were more of a nuisance than a threat to civilised historic Scotland'.⁵ Yet today, the kilt and the bagpipe represent a distinctive national identity.⁶

In Muslim societies, Jihadi groups like ISIS similarly radicalise and reinvent religious traditions. The fingered salute which symbolises the oneness of God, used by Muslims in prayers, has been defiled. ISIS militants posed with decapitated heads on one hand and display the fingered salute with the other. For ISIS to appear legitimate, Islamic symbols and practices have been used to provide some sense of continuity, giving an impression, to the naked eye, that they are adhering to religious traditions.

Traditions are also positively reinvented to bring social and political reforms in Muslim societies. Existing interpretations of Islam are challenged by reformist Muslims. Reform efforts in Muslim societies encompass gender equality, rights of minority groups, and liberalisation of Islam. These reform efforts take place within the framework of Islam. Muslims speak of reform without rejecting the essence of Islam, especially the spiritual comfort it offers.

SUPERIORITY AND RIGIDITY OF CATEGORISATION

The 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis is intended to demonstrate a collective superiority of Western civilisation over others. It also appears to warn those belonging to Western civilisation of the hostility directed towards them by other civilisations, especially Islamic civilisation. Huntington did not shy away from making these claims. But claims of superiority are an indication of a lack of understanding of others. This in turn contributes to othering, demonisation and dehumanisation of the 'inferior and violent' other.

In this so-called state of perpetual hostility, the proponents of the thesis argue that multiculturalism cannot succeed as migration brings together people of diverse, and incompatible, backgrounds. They reinforce the belief that people of different religious and cultural backgrounds cannot co-exist.

How, then, do we de-construct the 'Clash of Civilisations'?

Edward Said examines different civilisations not as rigid categories. According to him, civilisations interact, making the watertight compartmentalisation of civilisations inaccurate. Differences should be viewed as a strength not a threat.⁷ Therefore, civilisations are hybrids. Different civilisations learn and absorb from each other as the world is interconnected through networks of human capital. Islam's Abbassid dynasty under caliph Ma'mun revived Hellenic traditions, translating the works of Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle which had been lost and forgotten. The revived works were later transported to Europe. They became crucial for the foundation of Western political thought. Similarly, with the advancements made by Western powers in the nineteenth century, Muslim reformists looked to Europe to revive Islamic glory. In the words of Muhammad Abduh in the nineteenth century: 'I went to the West, I saw Islam and no Muslims...I came back to the East, I saw Muslims and no Islam'.⁸ Abduh argued that the depressing predicament of Muslim societies could be explained by the fact that they had regressed, while the West had embraced Islamic ideals. He looked

to Europe to revive the study of sciences and placed importance upon education and women's empowerment.

Therefore, as Said articulates, rigid categorisation of civilisations, and the argument that civilisations are incapable of interacting in a positive manner, is not only inaccurate but dangerously dismissive of others.

The 'watertight compartmentalisation' creates a 'separate other', inferior in achievements, values and sophistication. These arguments strip the humanity from the separate other, portraying them as a nuisance at best and the enemy at worst. These arguments undermine the multiculturalism that is inevitable in modern societies. Those belonging to separate cultures or civilisations are perceived as incapable of integrating. The 'us and them' mentality disrupts social harmony as it creates a sense of separation and difference, but more importantly facilitates the process of 'othering', leaving communities and individuals who do not belong to the dominant culture or race suffocated by the pressure to prove their loyalty and trustworthiness. The depiction of Muslims in media outlets, especially commercial media outlets in Australia, demonstrates these difficulties facing minority groups.⁹ These include Australians of Sudanese backgrounds who have been targeted by sensationalised news about African gang violence.

WE ARE STILL HERE AFTER 25 YEARS?

The 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis remains resilient. This is evident in the ongoing discourse of how Western civilisation needs to be preserved. Any effort to reconcile the West and the Muslim world is destined to fail. Only one sophisticated civilisation will survive the test of time. As the former Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, put it in his quest to implement the formalised tertiary study of Western civilisation through the Ramsay Centre, the proposed degree was not 'merely *about* Western civilisation but *in favour* of it'.¹⁰ This narrative reverberates across various parts of Europe and North America.



There is a degree of fear on the part of certain elements in Western societies. They fear that they are losing their tradition, culture, values and identity, and fear further that the existing political order, especially when of a left or centrist persuasion, has little appreciation for the efforts to preserve the gains made by great Western thinkers, explorers and inventors. They fear that the encroachment of the 'barbaric other' will dilute the authenticity of Western ideals.

The thesis is a manifestation of the fear caused by growing global instability, lack of opportunities domestically, and disruption of identities due to growing inequality, movement of people, and the changing nature of the global world. These destabilising conditions create a sense of urgency to preserve what is familiar, including identity, values and tradition. This is despite the fact that 'what is familiar is often elusive', and more importantly imagined without grounding in tangible reality. Benedict Anderson argues that the nation is socially constructed, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. Those who belong to this imagined political community view themselves as a homogenous entity, and some would even go as far as envisioning a shared destiny because of it. This is despite the fact that they may never meet each other in their lives. Drawing from this aspect of his work, it can be argued that Western civilisation is also imagined and socially constructed. However,

▲ Samuel P. Huntington, Chairman, Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies, USA, pictured during the 'When Cultures Conflict' session at the 2004 meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

IMAGE: WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM/ SWISS-IMAGE.CH: CC BY-SA 2.0, WIKIPEDIA, [HTTPS://EN.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/FILE:SAMUEL_P._HUNTINGTON_\(2004_WORLD_ECONOMIC_FORUM\).JPG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Samuel_P._Huntington_(2004_World_Economic_Forum).jpg)

even subconsciously, the imagined sense of belonging exists among members of the so-called civilisation.

Evidence for this can be found in public responses to incidents of violence. The 2015 Paris attacks drew wall-to-wall media coverage and worldwide condemnation, in which world leaders marched together against terrorism. US President Barack Obama called it 'an attack on all of humanity'. Rupert Murdoch declared that the 'Paris outrage [is] not an attack on all humanity, but an attack on us. ie, Western civilisation!'

The same attention was not given to the victims of ISIS massacres in Afghanistan, Syria and Pakistan, occurring contemporaneously, who remained nameless and faceless. They were just numbers.

VALIDITY OF THE THESIS

One question to be asked, if other traditions, cultures and value systems are not inferior, is this: why are some plagued with political backwardness, conflict, and a depressing state of misery in comparison to Western societies? The news emerging from some parts of the Middle East and Muslim societies is confronting. The media can be blamed for sensationalisation of news, but there is also truth in what is being reported.

Perhaps blaming value systems, religions and cultures, which are not monolithic anyway, is misleading. The socio-political circumstances of these societies prevent them from making the advances required for development. These circumstances include economic mismanagement which increases poverty, and a lack of investment in education. Similarly, ongoing conflict and the crippling effects of authoritarianism stunt and paralyse intellectual development. Global inequality paralyse the ability of poorer countries to provide the services required to enhance the living standards of their people.

The treatment of women in some Muslim societies is subject to intense criticism and denunciation and even used as justification for war. Besides destroying Saddam Hussein's non-existent weapons of mass destruction, George W. Bush articulated the need to 'liberate' Iraqi

women to justify his invasion of Iraq. Today, Iraqi women are in a worse state than ever. The invasion destroyed state infrastructure, crippled the economy, and created ongoing security threats to women. The necessary understanding of Muslim societies when passing judgement or enacting policies on the part of Western policy makers is lacking and inadequate. Often the wrong questions are asked. The work of Laila Abu-Lughood, titled 'Do Muslim Women Need Saving?' illustrates how women are the object of pity among some politicians in the United States who are in truth oblivious to the nature of the challenges facing such women. Abu-Lughood interviewed women from the Middle East and asked them if they felt disempowered or oppressed. These women admitted to ongoing oppression in their communities. They spoke of their grievances. However, when asked whether or not Islam oppresses them, these women were shocked and puzzled. One related that the reason she felt oppressed was because state authorities threatened to destroy her stall if she did not pay protection money. A Palestinian woman blamed the Israeli occupation for her grievances as she feels paralysed by her lack of freedom.¹¹ Many Muslim women who feel disempowered by their circumstances find comfort in their faith.

This is not to say that some Muslim women are not victimised by cultural practices and regressive interpretations of Islam. Female genital mutilation is often used as an example of how cultural and religious practices in Islam oppress women. The infamous Ayaan Hirsi 'Ali denounces Islam for a number of reasons but is perhaps best known for her condemnation of FGM in Muslim societies. However, her lack of understanding of the subject of FGM leads to misconceptions. For one, there is no religious justification for the practice in the Qur'an or in the Prophet's tradition. Second, it is practised in some African countries including among Christian communities. It is not a common practice in Saudi Arabia, even though Saudi Arabia is perhaps one of the most conservative Muslim countries. Many have described FGM as an African problem.

The practice is still widespread in Egypt, where young girls continue to die from the procedure. Although the Grand Mufti of al-Azhar University, which is known as the bastion of Sunni Islam, issued a religious ruling that condemned FGM, arguing that it was contrary to Islam,¹² many, especially in rural areas and low-income neighbourhoods in Egypt, still believe that the practice is a religious obligation. Today, both male and female activists in Egypt travel around the country to educate Egyptians about the dangers of FGM.

The difficulties in trying to end the practice can be attributed to poverty, lack of education and political paralysis. These debilitating circumstances prevent the development required to change the state of societies. They slow down societal changes initiated by local actors including reformists and activists.

Western societies have also gone through processes of gradual transformation and evolution. In 1950s Australia, unwed mothers were ostracised, their children taken from them and institutionalised. Some witnessed horrific abuses. Today, such practices are not only socially frowned-upon, but criminalised.

Even if the 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis is accepted at face value—that Western civilisation is homogeneous, more advanced and more sophisticated, because of the achievements made in scientific discoveries, stable political systems and strong institutions that are devoid of corruption—one question remains. What were the factors that contributed to the successful state of Western democracies today?

Was it civilisational isolation? Or was there a 'superior' civilisation imposing its values on Western societies, forcing them to develop? Western societies dealt with their problems without the aggressive intervention of those who are viewed as outside the Western world. Like others, Muslim societies continue to battle their inner demons including dealing with bigotry, inequality and abhorrent practices in the name of religion, culture and the preservation of outdated tradition. However, Muslims also have to deal with external hatred and prejudice. Anti-Muslim rhetoric reduces

the capacity of reformists to promote progress as attempts to introduce genuine liberalisation are conflated by their opponents with Western imposition on Muslims. Many Muslims remain traumatised by colonialism and external interventions that have only destabilised their communities.



RETHINKING THE MUSLIM OTHER?

Huntington's thesis was formulated outside the existing framework of nation states. He examined the collective consciousness of Western ideals predicated upon neo-liberalism, freedom and the notion of equality. There is a need to propagate a collective consciousness in today's world. It is perhaps important to move away from the state-centric approaches to dealing with problems facing the World. However, Huntington's way of dividing the world between good and evil, or civilised and backward, does not make the world a better place.

As Yuval Noah Harari, an Israeli historian, argues, we are part of the global community. Human beings are dealing with pressing problems that are global in nature. From climate change to refugee crises to international finance, there is a need to find common solutions. Even when dealing with terrorism, it is not a problem for the West alone; it is a problem confronting humanity. In Harari's words, 'ISIS may indeed pose a radical challenge, but the "civilisation" it challenges is a global civilisation rather than a uniquely Western phenomenon.'¹³ We are 'global citizens'; different cultures,

▲ Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Esfahan, Iran.

IMAGE: FARUK KAYMAK ON UNSPLASH



▲ Raihan Ismail delivering the 8th Annual Hancock Lecture in Sydney, November 2018.

IMAGE: THE AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY OF THE HUMANITIES

religions, ethnicities are to be celebrated in an environment of respectful engagement. Cosmopolitanism celebrates the ideal of global citizenship. It emphasises that we are all citizens of the world as well as recognises the world as diverse but interconnected. David Held examines the evolution of cosmopolitanism as an idea, tracing it back to Stoicism (a school of Hellenistic Philosophy). In his words ‘We inhabit two worlds...One that is local and assigned to us by birth and another that is truly great and truly common. Each person lives in both a local community and a wider community of human ideals, aspirations and argument.’¹⁴ The stoics propagate that loyalty should be given, first and foremost, to humanity and not to ethnicity, class and nation.¹⁵

The question is, how can you implement cosmopolitan principles in a world that has been governed by nation-states and nationalism for more than 200 years? If anything, with the revival of populist politics, cosmopolitanism is only a philosophical endeavour with no realistic structures. However, cosmopolitanism has gradually permeated our world with the establishment of global norms and legal frameworks. Global institutions are also restricted by powerful states. We’ve seen how the UN Security Council’s veto power undermines human rights, with Syria serving as a stark reminder of the failure of the international community.

These issues continue to be debated by scholars working in the field. David Held speaks of Cosmopolitan Law, in which global institutions are governed by principles that would enhance the protection of humanity. According to him Cosmopolitan Law is already enshrined in International Law, governed by principles of equality, equal worth and

dignity, inclusiveness and justice. This is not to suggest that the cosmopolitan alternative is easy to be implemented, especially when considering entrenched nation-state structures. Nationalism can also be a good thing. It can mobilise constructively. The drought crisis that is affecting Australian farmers has seen fellow citizens coming together to help. The idea that Australians belong to a shared political community, having the responsibility to help their fellow citizens, should not be undermined.

However, it is also important to extend this sense of belonging and inclusiveness to the global community, especially disenfranchised and marginalised peoples. The refugee crisis is a test for humanity, and everywhere across the globe refugees are failed miserably.

CHANGING THE GLOBAL DISCOURSE

The need to change global discourse and promote empathy, compassion and humanity in modern societies is more acute than ever. However, engagement pursued through the prism of superiority, looking down upon the unfortunate as barbaric, inferior and uncivilised, will not only be ineffective but will undermine mutual trust and the capacity to create positive relations. It is also crucial to work with local actors who truly understand the strength and weaknesses of their societies. It is the responsibility of those who are fortunate to assist those who are trapped in a prison of socio-political paralysis, conflict and de-development. More importantly, the fight against global inequality will reduce the gap between the haves and the have nots.

Assistance in the form of military intervention often results in the destabilisation of societies. This may reduce the capacity for state-building and prevent the development of the necessary tools such as education, political institutions and economic development for progress.

The principles of equality and human dignity are to be preserved. As the French poet, Aimé Césaire beautifully captured it:

But the work of Man is only just beginning, and it remains to conquer all

the violence entrenched in the recesses of our passion...and no race possesses the monopoly of beauty, of intelligence, of force. And there is a place for all at the rendezvous of victory.¹⁶

To do this, cosmopolitan principles of collective human consciousness may provide the necessary language to frame the global discourse that promotes inclusiveness and shared interests such as environmental protection, eradication of poverty and conflict resolution and prevention.

The rescue of the Thai soccer team from the cave in 2018 serves as a 'true' cosmopolitan moment. The world came together and disregarded ethnic, cultural and religious differences, all in the name of humanity. When the Thai people prayed and offered gifts to the spirits, the world reported with no prejudice and embraced the Thai boys as their own.

In conclusion, the 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis is chauvinistic as those who are perceived as outside the realm of Western civilisation are treated with contempt. The process of othering reduces the importance of empathy, which is a crucial trait for the survival of humanity. The civilisational divide is often imagined and cannot be sustained as the global world is interconnected more than ever. Cultural and civilisational hybridity are unavoidable. Despite its limitations, cosmopolitanism as an ideal in promoting a more inclusive global community is a much better alternative to Huntington's divisive world order. ¶

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