

The West Against the Rest? A Buddhist Response to “The Clash of Civilizations”

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The next world war, if there is one, will be a war between civilizations.
(Huntington 1993: 16)

Has September 11th vindicated Huntington's claim in “The Clash of Civilizations,” that the new battle lines today are the faults between the world's civilizations? Or is his argument becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy - because, for example, the U.S. response to 9-11 is deepening those fault-lines?

The collapse of most communist states in 1989 and the end of the Cold War raised worldwide hopes that were short-lived. Francis Fukuyama claimed that we had reached “the end of history,” but history didn't seem to notice. Although neither the United States nor the Soviet Union needed to support proxy wars anymore, violent conflicts continued, even in the backyard of a paralyzed Europe that could not figure out how to respond to Yugoslavia's disintegration. Despite the pre-eminence of the U.S., now unchallengeable as the only superpower, the world was not becoming any less messy. Other nations and peoples were not falling into line, into their proper places in the Pax Americana. What was going on? What new description of the world could make sense of it all?

The Gulf War of 1991 gave a hint. Saddam Hussein is not much of a Muslim and Iraq is hardly an Islamic state, but the aggressive U.S. response to his aggression against Kuwait aroused widespread support for his cause among other Muslim peoples (although less so among their more cautious governments). Few of them agreed that the sanctions afterwards imposed on Iraq, which have caused widespread misery including the deaths of over half a million Iraqi children, “are worth the cost,” as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright famously put it. A civil war in eastern Europe had Christians fighting Muslims. In southern Asia there was more tension between India and Pakistan, and occasionally battles in Kashmir. China too continued to be difficult, modernizing in its own way: a growing source of cheap labor, and occasionally a big market for Western products, but unwavering in its own political direction and suppression of all dissent.

The penny dropped. When he wrote “The Clash of Civilizations,” Samuel P. Huntington was the Eaton Professor of Government and Director of the Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University. His now-famous essay was originally written for an Olin Institute project

on "The Changing Security Environment and American National Interests," published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993, and then expanded into a book.* As this genesis suggests, what it offers us is not some impartial overview of global civilization but the post-war world as perceived by the U.S. foreign-policy elite - the "best and brightest" that previously gave us the Vietnam War and the "domino theory" that also rationalized U.S. support for Pinochet, the Shah of Iran, Marcos, Suharto, etc. Huntington himself was a consultant for the State Department in 1967, when he wrote a long position paper that supported U.S. goals in Vietnam but criticized the military strategy for attaining them.

I mention this not to make an ad hominem attack on Huntington's ideas but to clarify the purpose for his essay: determining the new security needs of the United States in the post-Cold War world. This becomes apparent in its second half, which is more obviously concerned about defending "the values and interests of the West" against those of other civilizations. This subtext is not always explicit but it determines what Huntington sees, and what he is unable to see.

What he sees is a new global paradigm that brings the new global mess into focus. The era of struggle between nation-states and rival ideologies is over. Democratic societies, in particular, do not go to war against each other. The new conflicts are between civilizations, which have different languages, histories, institutions, and - most importantly - different religions. Huntington lists seven or eight civilizations: Western, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin-American, "and possibly African" (3). The differences between them are more fundamental than the old differences between political regimes or ideologies. Huntington claims that increasing interaction among people of different civilizations is enhancing the historical "civilization-consciousness" of peoples in ways that "invigorate differences and animosities stretching or thought to stretch back deep into history" (4).

This challenges the usual and more irenic perception that increasing contact tends to decrease tensions. Today, more than ever, people from different parts of the world not only buy each other's commodities and consume each other's products but enjoy each other's music, films and TV shows, fashions and food; when they have the opportunity, many are eager to travel to far-away countries, to meet other people, and sometimes even to intermarry. Is this increasing contact and awareness also increasing inter-civilizational intolerance and strife, or decreasing it? Or does that question miss the point because the effects of all this interaction are too complicated to generalize about in either simpleminded way?

Civilizations, Huntington tells us, are the broadest level of cultural identity that people have, "short of that which distinguishes humans from other species" (2). Why such cultural differences should be emphasized more than our similarities as fellow humans is not immediately obvious, except perhaps for the unfortunate but common tendency to identify ourselves by distinguishing our own interests from those of some other "out group." This is no minor point, if the subtext of

Huntington's argument - U.S. national security - itself exemplifies such an "in group" defending its own interests at the cost of other groups. U.S. relations with Latin America is an obvious example: history suggests that the Monroe Doctrine (1823) was promulgated not so much to protect Central and South American countries from European interference as to monopolize U.S. interference.

How are present global tensions viewed by those who are not part of the Western elite? What other perspectives are possible? Although a U.S. citizen (but not part of any elite!), I have been living in Southeast and East Asia since 1977. And although these regions are home to at least three of Huntington's civilizations - Hindu, Confucian, and Japanese - what I have been able to observe is something quite different from Huntington's clash of civilizations. While there are certainly clashes of values and interests, those tensions are more readily understood as due to the efforts of a West "at the peak of its power" (5) to transform the rest of the globe in ways that suit the self-perceived interests of its own elites (especially U.S. corporate managers). From an Asian perspective, Western-led economic, political, technological and cultural globalization is the main event of our times, and resistance to it is where the fault lines have formed.

Such globalization is not one development but a web of related processes, usually (although not always) augmenting each other. From this alternative perspective, the fissures that matter most today are not civilizational differences but the conflicting social forces promoting or challenging different aspects of globalization - resulting in various social stresses, most obviously due to economic changes or pressures.

This is not a small point. Huntington's clash of civilizations assumes a pluralism of irreconcilable values and interests in the world, which paradoxically both implies value-relativism ("Since there is really no such thing as 'the best civilization'...") and justifies Western ethnocentrism (...we should defend and promote our own values and interests"). If, however, the real issue is Western-sponsored globalization, then that globalization can and should be evaluated according to the ways it is changing societies, including Western ones.

To ask whether globalization is good or bad is to miss the point: to say it again, globalization is too complicated to characterize so simply. For example, many of those who want more human rights and more consumer goods are also suspicious of the self-preoccupied individualism that seems to encourage social breakdown in some Western countries. Then the most important question becomes: who is entitled to decide which changes a society will embrace, and which to reject? The WTO? A West defending its own interests? Or the people most affected by those changes?

It is a mistake to overlook the same fissures deepening within the West. Huntington's West is more or less monolithic, yet if we do not focus so much on the differences between civilizations

we can see the same tensions at home, especially in the United States. Internationally, globalization has been increasing the gap between rich and poor; the same thing is happening inside the U.S. Internationally, globalization is increasing corporate influence on governments, as well as corporate dominance of economies and natural resources; the same thing is happening in the U.S. Internationally, an anti-globalization movement has sprung up to challenge these developments; a similar resistance has developed within the United States, the strongest domestic movement since the Vietnam war. Because the pressures of globalization tend to affect different civilizations in some similar ways, much the same tensions and ruptures are recurring in different civilizations.

One way to focus this point is by considering the role of religion in these struggles. Religion is crucial for Huntington. It is the most important way that civilizations differentiate themselves from each other. In his Foreign Affairs response to his critics, he claims that "in the modern world, religion is a central, perhaps the central force, that motivates and mobilizes people" (63). His original article quotes George Weigel -- the "unsecularization of the world is one of the dominant social facts of life in the late twentieth century" - and emphasizes that this revival of religion serves as a basis for identity and commitment transcending nations and unifying civilizations (4).

Religions unite civilizations by providing people with a common identity, which they are often willing to die and kill for. Religions are also the source and repository for our most cherished values - except perhaps in the modern West, where traditional religion has been losing a war of attrition with this-worldly values such as Enlightenment rationalism, secular nationalism, "moneytheism" and consumerism. For Huntington the social scientist and foreign policy mandarin, what is most important about religions is that the identity they provide is irreconcilable with other religious identities. A Jew is a Jew, a Muslim is a Muslim, and ne'er the twain shall meet. That is why religious differences are at the heart of the civilizational clash.

Again, things look rather different from a perspective more sensitive to religious values than to "realist" foreign policy (i.e., nationalist) values. The struggle over globalization is, at its heart, not just a clash of identities but a clash of values: the values which people of different cultures want to live by. In order to understand the contemporary conflicts that religions are involved in, we must also realize that the secular culture of the modern West does not really offer an alternative to religious values; rather, it offers this-worldly versions of them. Religion is notoriously difficult to define, but if we understand it functionally - as teaching us what is really important about the world, and therefore how to live in it - modern identities such as secular nationalism and modern values such as consumerism are not so much alternatives to religion as secular religions. They offer this-worldly solutions to the problem of ultimate meaning in life: for example, patriotic identification with one's nation (a poor impersonal substitute for genuine community) or the promise of a more sensuous salvation in consumerism (the next thing you

buy will make you happy!).

The Cold War victory of the West means that capitalism now reigns unchallenged and so has been able to remove its velvet gloves. Because capitalism evolved within a Christian culture, they have been able to make peace with each other, more or less, in the contemporary West. Christ's kingdom is not of this world, we should render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and as long as we go to church on Sunday we can devote the rest of the week to this-worldly pursuits. From some other more traditional religious perspectives, however, the values of globalizing capitalism are more problematical.

Buddhism, for example, emphasizes that in order for us to become happy our greed, ill will and delusion must be transformed into generosity, compassion and wisdom. Such a transformation is difficult to reconcile with an economic globalization that seems to encourage greed (producers never have enough profit, advertising ensures that consumers are never satisfied), ill will (too busy looking out for "number one"!), and delusion (the world - our mother as well as our home -- de-sacralized by commodifying everything into resources for buying and selling).

Buddhism provides other problems for Huntington's thesis, since it straddles the Indian, Chinese, and Japanese civilizations he identifies; and Buddhism is beginning to make significant inroads into the West as well, another phenomenon that does not fit well into his paradigm of faults between civilizations. If religious identity provides the core of civilizations, why was Buddhism successful not only in India and other South Asian and Southeast Asian cultures, but also in China, Tibet, Korea, Japan, etc.? Why did many Chinese syncretically embrace Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism? Why do many Japanese celebrate a birth at a Shinto shrine, wed with a Christian ceremony, and perform Buddhist funeral rites?

As the Buddhist example shows, tensions do not arise simply because of a clash of fissured, irreconcilable value systems, in which we need to focus on promoting our own. In the contemporary world all religions are under tremendous pressure to adapt to new circumstances, including new world-views and new values, for globalization means that re-negotiation with modern developments is constant. Fundamentalism -- clinging to old verities and customs -- is a common response, but the fact that some fundamentalists are willing to die and kill for their cause does not quite disguise the reality that the fundamentalist reaction to modernity is defensive, cramped and in the long run untenable in a fast-shrinking world where all civilizations are increasingly interconnected.

This does not mean that religious beliefs and values are incompatible with globalization. It means that the struggle between globalization and anti-globalization is in part an on-going negotiation between traditional religious concerns - most importantly, love and responsibility to something greater than our own egos - and the corrosive effects of a secular modernity that, when

unchecked, tends to become nihilistic.

For either side to "win" this struggle would be disastrous. Traditional religions need the challenge of modernity to wake them from their dogmas and institutional sclerosis. On the other side, the unrestrained dominance of corporate capitalism and its commodifying values would be catastrophic not only for human communities but for the entire biosphere.

The real test-case for their negotiation is Islam. Huntington discusses many clashes between civilizations, and most of them involve Islam. "Islam has bloody borders" (5). Without Islam, it would be difficult for him to make his case; thanks to Islam, it is easy, since the Islamic world seems to have trouble getting along with any other world.

Or so it seems from a Western perspective. That perspective, however, is hardly a neutral one. For most of their histories, the Christian West and the Islamic world have been each other's chief rivals. At first Islam had the edge, culturally as well as militarily. Medieval Christian theology and philosophy were revived by the rediscovery of classical Greek texts preserved by Islamic scholars; European science developed on an Arabic foundation. That is part of Islam's burden today: in contrast to early Christianity, which had to endure centuries of Roman persecution, Islam was immediately triumphant, establishing a mythic legacy that makes eclipse (including colonial and now economic subordination) by the modern West all the more difficult to bear.

There are other ways in which Islam stands out from other missionary religions such as Christianity and Buddhism. Unlike Jesus and Shakyamuni Buddha, Mohammed was not only a spiritual teacher but a political and military leader, in ways which were often quite progressive for his time, but some of which have become problematical as the world has changed. Because neither Jesus nor Shakyamuni provided a detailed political or economic program, it has been easier to adapt their teachings to radically different cultural conditions, including secular modernity. Today a Christian can pray in church on Sunday and more or less serve Mammon the rest of the week. A Muslim prays five times a day and follows more than a few customs from seventh-century Arabia, including studying and memorizing the Koran in Arabic.

Partly as a result of these differences, Islam has remained more traditionalist than either Christianity or Buddhism. No religion is monolithic, and all major religions have deep fissures of their own, including an unavoidable one between literal interpretations of scriptures and more adaptable metaphorical readings. There have been rationalist movements in Islam such as the Mutazilists in the ninth century, and more recently many other attempts at modernist reform, but they have generally been less successful than similar movements in Christianity and Buddhism. As a result, the contemporary image of Islam among most non-Muslims is of an extremely conservative, ritualistic and literalistic faith. Among the major religions, Islam is having the most difficulty adjusting to the modern distinction between an enervated sacred

sphere and a more dynamic secular sphere. There are also political problems due to the legacy of Western colonialism (including the imposition of a nation-state structure that evolved in Europe and has not often grafted well onto non-Western cultures) and economic problems due to the neo-colonialism of Western-led globalization.

Yet there is another way to look at Muslim difficulties today. Of the world's missionary religions, Islam is the one most deeply concerned with social justice - and social justice is an increasingly important issue in the struggles over what kind of globalization we shall have. That is the other side of Muhammad's legacy as a political leader as well as a spiritual one. This theme is missing in Huntington, but we cannot understand Islamic values and present concerns without it. That is why it is not sufficient to emphasize the fissure between Islam and the West, a clash between their values and ours. A demand for social justice has become essential in a world where, according to the United Nations Development Report for 1999, almost a billion people in 70 countries consume less today than they did 25 years ago; where the richest twenty percent of the world's population now account for 86% of private consumption, the poorest twenty percent only 1.3% (a gap that globalization so far is aggravating) ; where, as a result, a quarter million children die of malnutrition or infection every week, while hundreds of millions more survive in hunger and deteriorating health.

Allah is a merciful God but He is also a God of justice and will judge us harshly if we do not accept personal and collective responsibility for the less fortunate. The third pillar of Islam is zakat, alms. Zakat is not so much charity as an essential expression of the compassion that all Muslims are called upon to show to those who need it. Muslims believe that everything really belongs to God, and material things should be used as God wishes them to be used. This means not hoarding but sharing with others who need them. That is why the capitalist idea of using capital to gain ever more capital - you can never have too much! - is foreign, even reprehensible, to many devout Muslims.

By adapting so well to the modern world of secular nationalism, capitalism and consumerism, most Christians in the West have learned to finesse such concerns. The Bible tells us that the poor will always be among us, and in any case we must accept what the "social science" of economics tells us are laws of supply and demand, the importance of free trade, etc. Admittedly, the main effect of transnational capitalism so far has been to make the rich richer, but we must have faith that a rising tide of worldwide wealth will eventually lift all boats.

Islam is less willing to accept such equivocations, because it recognizes no God above Allah. The need to "have faith" that corporate globalization will eventually work to benefit almost everyone points to what is increasingly apparent: as Western culture has lost faith in any afterlife salvation, the West's economic system has also become its religion, because it now has to fulfil a religious function for us. Economics today is less a social science than the theology of that

moneytheistic religion, and its god, the Market, has been able to become a vicious circle of ever-increasing production and consumption by pretending to provide us with a this-worldly salvation. Western-led globalization means that the Market is becoming the first truly world religion, rapidly converting all corners of the globe to a worldview and set of values whose religious role we overlook only because we insist on seeing them as secular.

Few people yet understand pro- versus anti-globalization struggles in such spiritual terms, but many instinctively feel what is at stake, in a way that Huntington does not. The clash of civilizations is a convenient paradigm for foreign-policy mandarins who take globalization for granted, and who prefer to insulate the culture-specific values of different religions: let them have their values, and we'll have ours! For those who can see how the West is imposing new "religious" values on other civilizations in the economic guise of "free trade," Huntington's paradigm is a smokescreen that obscures more than it reveals about the ways the world is now groaning and travailing together.

The issue of social justice also brings me to my final point: to a gaping fissure that runs right through the middle of Huntington's own essay. Although he concludes by calling on the West to develop a better understanding of the religious and philosophical understandings of other civilizations, Huntington has more specific short-term recommendations for Western (read "U.S.") foreign policy, including: to maintain Western military superiority, to exploit differences among Islamic and Confucian states (he is worried about a nascent Confucian-Islamic axis), to support non-Western groups that are "sympathetic to Western values and interests," and "to strengthen international institutions that reflect and legitimate Western interests and values" (24-25). The hard-headed realist has no illusions about a world community of civilizations, but his oft-repeated phrase "Western values and interests" deserves some attention for the way it elides one to the other.

In the only place where he identifies Western values, Huntington trots out the usual shibboleths: "individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state" - which "often have little resonance" in other cultures. And what is the relationship between these Western values and Western interests? Huntington never addresses this uncomfortable question, perhaps because it is difficult to square these mostly commendable ideals with the ways that the United States has actually treated other nations when its own short-term interests have been at stake.

We have supported constitutionalism, human rights, liberty, the rule of law and democracy in other countries when those values have produced leaders amenable to our own national interests. Those same values evidently resonate less loudly for us when they produce leaders who have different ideas. In 1954, for example, the U.S. sponsored a coup against the democratically elected government of Guatemala, which over the following years led to the deaths of over 100,000

peasants. In 1965 the U.S. overthrew the government of the Dominican Republic and helped to kill some 3000 people in the process. In 1973, the U.S. sponsored a coup against the democratic government of Chile that murdered or "disappeared" several thousand people. In the 1980s the U.S. sponsored a terrorist contra war against the government of Nicaragua, which led to the deaths of over 30,000 innocent people and to a World Court declaration that the U.S. government was a war criminal for mining Nicaragua's harbors. Another U.S.-supported war in the 1980s against El Salvador resulted in the deaths of 80,000 more innocent people. Lots of "collateral damage."

All those recent examples are from Latin America alone. Also in 1965, the U.S. sponsored or assisted a military coup in Indonesia that led to the deaths of well over half a million people. When President Bush declares that Iran is part of a new "axis of evil," we should remember why many Iranians return the compliment, viewing the U.S. government as "the Great Satan." Why? When Western oil interests were threatened, the CIA helped to sponsor a brutal coup that installed the widely detested Shah of Iran, whose notorious Savak secret service then proceeded to torture and kill over 70,000 Iranians between 1952 and 1979.

There are many more examples, unfortunately, but the point is made. Clearly, the problem here is something more than not living up to our own ideals. Nor do we just keep making mistakes, such as innocently backing the wrong sort of people. Once can be a mistake, twice may be stupidity, but this pattern of repeated violations of our own self-declared values amounts to something more sinister. "By their fruits shall you know them," as someone once put it. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that our so-called values are not really our values, at least not when it comes to international relations. The basic problem is not a clash between our values and theirs, but between our (declared) values and our (short-term) interests.

Huntington admits that a world of clashing civilizations is inevitably a world of double standards (13), but with such a clash between U.S. ideals and U.S. interests, one need not look any further to understand why U.S. international goals so often meet resistance. Given how little most Americans know about the rest of the world, it is not surprising that other civilizations - on the receiving end of U.S. foreign policy - are more aware of this clash than we are. As long as our pre-eminent foreign policy value continues to be narrow and often brutal self-interest, we will not need a sophisticated new paradigm to explain why the new Pax Americana is not working.

Surely Huntington, a distinguished Ivy League professor of international relations, knows about these violations of the Western ideals he identifies. Why does he ignore such a gaping fissure between U.S. values and U.S. interests? Perhaps he regards such incidents as regrettable but unavoidable consequences of the Cold War, whereas the clash of civilizations is a post-Cold War paradigm... Yet such rationalizations won't do. If we were concerned to combat communism in

Latin America, we picked some of the worst ways to do it - ways that alienated many of the best people in those countries and made them more sympathetic to alternatives such as communism. No, the basic problem is that U.S. foreign policy has been more concerned with the best interests of the United Fruit Company, etc., than with the best interests of Latin Americans.

And what about today? Even if we ignore recent military and more covert actions, in the year 2001 alone the U.S. refused to join 123 other nations in banning the use and production of anti-personnel bombs and mines (February) ; Bush declared the Kyoto global warming protocol "dead" and refused to participate in revising it, because that might harm the U.S. economy (March) ; the United States refused to participate in OECD-sponsored talks in Paris, on ways to crack down on off-shore tax and money-laundering havens (May) ; the U.S. was the only nation to oppose the U.N. Agreement to Curb the International Flow of Illicit Small Arms (July) ; and the United States withdrew from the landmark 1972 Antiballistic Missile Treaty, to the dismay of virtually every other country (December). In addition, the U.S. has not ratified the Comprehensive (Nuclear) Test Ban Treaty, signed by 164 nations but opposed by Bush; and the U.S. has rejected the Land Mine Treaty, concluded in Ottawa in December 1997 and signed by 122 countries, because the Pentagon finds land mines useful.

Do these examples support a clash of civilizations, or show that the United States is unwilling to work with other civilizations? As the only superpower, the U.S. cherishes its sovereignty because it wants to be free to do whatever it wants to do, regardless of what the rest of the world may think. In that case, however, is the clash of civilizations a valid paradigm for understanding the world, or a self-fulfilling rationalization for self-serving behavior in the world?

Born and raised a U.S. citizen, I value most of the ideals that Huntington identifies as Western: liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, and so forth. As a convert to Buddhism - an inter-civilizational religious traitor? - I also believe that a life lived in accordance with such ideals will not be a happy one unless I also make efforts to transform my greed into generosity, my ill-will into compassion, and my delusions into wisdom. Buddhism teaches me that this not only makes others happier but is even more important for my own happiness, because that is the only way to overcome the illusory duality between myself and other people.

Is the same also true collectively, for the relations between cultures? If the answer is yes, there are immense consequences for U.S. relations with the rest of the world, and for the Western relationship with other civilizations. Instead of dismissing such Buddhist ideals as foreign, relativizing them as the attributes of an alien civilization, another option is to learn from them, and perhaps even assimilate them into our own culture, as China, Tibet, Korea, Japan, etc., have done.

The rest of the world still has much to learn about such Western ideals as human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, and democracy; for that matter, so does the West. The West may also have much to gain from a more profound understanding of the basic religious and philosophical values underlying other civilizations - as Huntington perhaps implies in the last paragraph of his essay.

Any American who lives outside the U.S. for long cannot help but be reminded, repeatedly, how important the United States is for the rest of the world. It is not just that others enjoy our pop culture or crave our consumer goods. Most other nations look to the United States for international leadership, and they are repeatedly dismayed when a nation that is already by far the wealthiest and most powerful responds by promoting its own short-term interests at the cost of a larger good - and at the cost of its own long-term interests, in an increasingly interdependent world.

Too many Americans think that, because the U.S. is "the greatest country in the world," we do not need to learn from other countries, or to concern ourselves with their values and interests; rather, they need to emulate and adjust to us. September 11th has shown us that this attitude is dangerous as well as arrogant.

* My page references are to the essay, as later republished in *The Clash of Civilizations? The Debate* (New York: Foreign Affairs, 1996).