



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“Beyond the *Clash of Civilizations*”

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Extracted from the original address

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

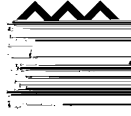
We are moving into an age when different civilisations will have to learn to live side-by-side in peaceful interchange, learning from each other, studying each other’s history, and ideals of art and of culture to mutually enrich each other’s lives. The alternative in this overcrowded little world is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

Lester Pearson

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

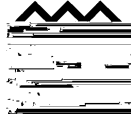
This quotation comes to us from the 1950s, forty years before Samuel Huntington wrote the book, *Clash Of Civilizations* (Simon & Schuster, 1996; Touchstone, 1998). It is important to understand Huntington’s thesis in the context of Lester Pearson’s statement. Huntington is a scholar of International 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; ra



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



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.

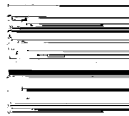
However, there are forces at work that are not very comfortable with such globally emerging frameworks. Regions still matter, regionalism is strong, regional interests are strong, and there is no truly representative sense of what these interests should be, shared across the nation. It is a trend that 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





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