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A Review Article
The World in the Post-1990s

Bassam M. Madany

In one of his famous lectures, *De Descriptione Temporum*, "On the Description of Our Times," C. S. Lewis set forth this thesis: It is absolutely necessary to understand the true nature of our times. It was over fifty years ago when he gave this lecture on the occasion of assuming a new position at Cambridge University. After his conversion to the historic Christian faith, he became deeply concerned about the de-Christianization of our culture. He called it a post-Christian culture. As a lecturer at Cambridge, he did not leave his faith outside the lecture hall. This conviction shaped his entire career and made him one of the most influential Christian lay theologians and apologists in the twentieth century.

I have been tremendously helped by this thesis of C. S. Lewis concerning the necessity of assessing the basic nature of the cultural milieu that surrounds us. His thesis echoed our Lord's admonition (Matthew 16:1-3) to his contemporaries about the necessity of discerning the *"semeia ton kairon"* (i.e., the "signs of the times"). The Pharisees knew how to forecast the weather in the eastern Mediterranean world, but showed an abysmal ignorance of the critical nature of the hour in Palestine during the first century. By fostering the hope of a coming political Messiah who would throw off the yoke of Rome, they immunized their people against receiving the true Messiah who came to save them from their sins. Eventually, the outcome was horrible.

In A.D. 70, Jerusalem was destroyed, and in A.D. 135, it ceased to exist after the second Jewish revolt. Another scattering of the Jewish people ensued that lasted for centuries.

What about our times? Have we learned the lessons of history? A British authority on the former Soviet Union, Robert Conquest, wrote in his new book, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century,*

> The huge catastrophes of our era have been inflicted by human beings driven by certain thoughts. And so history's essential questions must be: How do we account for what has been called the "ideological frenzy" of the twentieth century? How did these mental aberrations gain a purchase? What was the sort and condition of people affected? We need to develop the history and the nature of the various destructive ideologies in action. We need to consider the history and traditions of the culture that stood in opposition to them. But before we turn to these broader themes, we need to examine the history and background of the mental arena in which the battle of ideas was fought.
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> Both scarcely formulated fanaticisms and closed systems of ideas are, of course, to be found throughout the past. These historical phenomena are full of lessons for our time (indeed ignorance of history is one of the most negative attributes of modern man). The basic characteristic and attraction was and is the archaic idea that utopia can be constructed on earth; the offer of a millenarian solution to all human problems.[1]

What about us, now living at the beginning of the Third Millennium? Have we learned the lessons of history? Do we discern the "signs of the times"? The cold war is over. The Soviet Union is a thing of the past. Germany is united. Mainland China has discarded Marxist economics and is knocking at the door of the World Trade Organization. Some Western intellectuals have advanced the thesis

that "history has come to an end." What they mean is that the world that most of us knew and experienced during the major part of the twentieth century is gone. The West and its values have triumphed on a global scale.

Samuel Huntington's thesis is opposed to that advanced by the "end of history" theorists. In his book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order,* he wrote:

> Modernization, in short, does not necessarily mean Westernization. Non-Western societies can modernize and have modernized without abandoning their own cultures and adopting wholesale Western values, institutions, and practices. The latter, indeed, may be almost impossible: whatever obstacles non-Western cultures pose to modernization pale before those they pose to Westernization. It would, as Braudel observes, almost "be childish" to think that modernization or the "triumph of civilization in the singular" would lead to the end of plurality of historic cultures embodied for centuries in the world's great civilizations. Modernization, instead, strengthens those cultures and reduces the relative power of the West. In fundamental ways, the world is becoming more modern and less Western.[2]

If the above thesis of Professor Huntington is correct, and I do believe that it is so as attested by the events of the 1990s, then what is our responsibility as Christians living in the West, enjoying its privileges, and witnessing its culture sliding into chaos and dissolution? Our duty is to resist the steady secularization of our culture, and to allow our two-thousand-year-old tradition to guide our thinking and our plans on a truly Biblical course.

It follows that we reject the superficiality and the triumphalism of the thesis that the West, with its values and traditions, has become the universal civilization. On the contrary, since the end of the cold war, we have observed

the rebirth of old civilizations that affirm their own values and traditions. The world has not become one world, but it is still composed of many worlds, each informed by its own culture, which in its turn, *is based on a specific religious tradition.*

Professor Huntington describes *The World of Civilizations: Post-1990* as being composed of nine distinct civilizations. They are the Western, Latin American, African, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist, and Japanese. Our concern is primarily with the Islamic culture and the results of its reawakening and demands. This emphasis on Islam is necessary when we make an analysis of the world events and trouble spots since the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century.

The singularly most dramatic event that may still be fresh in our memory is the Gulf War. We may have forgotten its details. Americans demonstrated their overwhelming military power and advanced technology in transporting 500,000 men and women with their equipment halfway across the world. The war was won with minimum casualties. But it had a profound impact on the thinking of the Muslim peoples of the world. Radical Muslims depicted the war as a Western invasion of the sacred land of Arabia and not as a liberation of a small Islamic state, Kuwait.

Since the end of the Gulf War, most of the conflicts have occurred within Islamic areas. The disintegration of Yugoslavia and Serbia's attempt to overwhelm Bosnia brought the West into the area to aid its Muslim population. Then, a new geographic entity came to our attention, Kosovo, and the decision of NATO countries to oust the Serbs by military force from that province. The war against Serbia by NATO forces led to the destruction of most of the infrastructure of the country. This Kosovo "police action" had an important Islamic component. Nowadays, we watch on our television screens the savage war in Chechnya, which pits the Russian forces against the Muslim Chechnians.

It is not my intention to dwell on all the conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims. Think of East Timor and its almost complete destruction by the Muslim militias with the support of the Indonesian army. And since the early days of 2000, we have witnessed the horrible events going on in Nigeria, where some northern states dominated by Muslim majorities declared their intention to implement Shari'ah Law on all the population, whether Muslim, Christian or animist. The city of Kaduna looked like a war zone in the report of BBC Television.

It is neither prejudice nor a willingness to ignite old conflicts between Islam and the rest, but simply a realism that requires us to consider that the major challenge of the new century is how to co-exist with the growing radicalization of Islamic societies in a globalized world. The age of conquests and re-conquests belongs to the past. The worlds of Samuel Huntington, much as they want to live according to their own cultural traditions, still remain very interdependent. New problems of giant proportions have arisen within the Islamic world: desertification, the lack of adequate water resources for soaring populations, the growing pollution problem that besets the developing countries. All of these facts require the attention of the whole world. There may be nine distinct worlds, classified as such on a cultural basis, but there is only one *oecumene*, one inhabited earth, one world in which we all live, and one atmosphere that we all share!

What should our position be vis-à-vis the challenges of the New Millennium, and especially, our relationship with the Islamic World? Since the 1990s, the West has been unable to formulate a rational and consistent policy to guide our international relations with the more than forty Islamic countries of the world. This can be seen in our

rushing to come to the help of Muslim minorities in Europe, but failing to lift a finger to help the African Christians in Sudan who have lost more than a million of their people in a struggle with the Muslim government. We talk about human rights, but we are selective in our going to the aid of victims of oppression should they happen to be Christian. Is it because African Christians are of less human value than the Muslims of Bosnia or Chechnya? Are we motivated solely by an ill-defined national interest, which may be nothing more than a materialistic concern for our economic prosperity?

When we come to chapter 4, we notice a very sobering title, "The Fading of the West: Power, Culture, and Indigenization." I would like to quote at length from the opening words:

> Two pictures exist of the power of the West in relation to other civilizations. The first is of overwhelming, triumphant, almost total Western dominance. The disintegration of the Soviet Union removed the only serious challenge to the West and as a result the world is and will be shaped by the goals, priorities, and interests of the principal Western nations, and perhaps an occasional assist from Japan. As the one remaining superpower, the United States together with Britain and France make the crucial decisions on political and security issues; the United States together with Germany and Japan make the crucial decisions on economic issues. The West is the only civilization which has substantial interests in every other civilization or region and has the ability to affect the politics, economics, and security of every other civilization or region. Societies from other civilizations usually need Western help to achieve their goals and protect their interests.[3]

Does not this picture prove the triumph of Western ideals and culture? Why resist the facts that inform us about the greatness of Western nations and the almost universal acceptance of their ideals? But this bold assurance of the West and its global triumph over other civilizations had already been questioned at the end of World War I. The German "writer on philosophy of history, Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), wrote a two-volume book that was translated into English under the title, *Decline of the West (1918-22)*, in which he predicted the eclipse of Western civilization." [4] Spengler had the foresight to see that notwithstanding the great existing empires of Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain, and Portugal, the seeds of decline had already set in among the Western nations. In his old age, he must have noticed with great sorrow the rise of National Socialism under the leadership of Adolph Hitler. World War II that followed a few years later, while bringing about the victory of the Allies over Germany, Italy, and Japan, nevertheless exhausted their resources. They began with Britain first to dismantle their huge possessions in Asia and Africa. The Cold War followed, as well as some hot wars in Korea and Vietnam. This list does not include the many regional wars such as the one fought by Pakistan and India over Kashmir, and the many Arab-Israeli wars.

So, after enumerating all the factors that point to the greatness of Western culture and its achievements by the end of the twentieth century, Professor Huntington writes:

> The second picture of the West is very different. It is of a civilization in decline, its share of world political, economic, and military power going down relative to that of other civilizations. The West's victory in the Cold War has produced not just triumph but exhaustion. The West is increasingly concerned with its problems and needs, as it confronts slow economic growth, stagnating populations, unemployment, huge government deficits, a declining work ethic, low saving rates, and in many countries including the United Sates social disintegration, drugs and crime. Economic power is

> rapidly shifting to East Asia, and military power and political influence are starting to follow. India is on the verge of economic takeoff and the Islamic world is increasingly hostile toward the West. The willingness of other societies to accept the West's dictates or abide by its sermons is rapidly evaporating, and so are the West's self-confidence and will to dominate.[5]

In a sense, both pictures of the West as depicted above are true when taken together. The West at present looks quite dominant, economically and militarily. Americans like to refer to their country as the only "remaining superpower." But there is no insurance policy that guarantees the continuation of this status. Greatness does not consist merely in the areas of economics and military power. Rome, at the time of the Lord Jesus Christ, was mighty. Its empire stretched from the southern borders of Scotland to Palestine. Eventually Rome imploded. And while the Eastern Roman Empire (known also as Byzantium) lasted for another millennium, it finally succumbed under the attacks of the Muslim armies of the Ottoman Turks. Constantinople, the Rome of Eastern Christendom, became Istanbul; its magnificent churches were gradually changed into mosques beginning in 1453.

Huntington lists "three major characteristics" regarding the decline of the West:

> First, it is a slow process. The rise of Western powers took 400 years. Its recession could take as long. In the 1980s the distinguished British scholar Hedley Bull argued that "European or Western dominance of the universal international society may be said to have reached its apogee about the year 1900." Spengler's first volume appeared in 1918 and the "decline of the West" has been a central theme in twentieth-century history. The process itself has stretched out through most of the century.
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> Second, decline does not proceed in a straight line. It is highly irregular with pauses, reversals, and reassertion of Western power following manifestations of Western weakness.
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> Third, power is the ability of one person or group to change the behavior of another person or group. Behavior may be changed through inducement, coercion, or exhortation, demographic, political, technological, social, or other resources.[6]

Professor Huntington argues further that these resources necessary for change "peaked early in the twentieth century." In other words, at present, we do not seem to possess this necessary quality for genuine renewal. Furthermore, after a long sleep, non-Western cultures have awakened. Once, especially during the colonial era, they may have admired the West, and especially its military power. Nowadays, non-Western nations deride Western values and affirm their own. These cultures have been, and still are nurtured by their religious traditions. While secularism increases in the West as witnessed by the divorce between morality and political office, non-Western nations proclaim loudly and clearly the greatness of their religions. They seek to integrate their faith in all aspects of their culture, including the political realm. Witness the recent triumph of the Hindu party in the national elections and the decline of the secular Congress party that began with the Nehru, the British-educated Indian leader. Needless to mention the Islamic countries that are witnessing the rise of radical Islam. This phenomenon is manifested most clearly in the attempts to recreate political regimes similar to the rule of Muhammad in Medina and his successors, the Caliphs.

Certainly, it is not my intention to over-emphasize the probability of a dark future for the West. But one cannot,

when witnessing the tremendous changes that have taken place lately on the global scene, but be alarmed at the acceleration of the "Decline of the West."

Our ultimate hope, as Christians, remains the great Christian hope, that of the coming of Jesus Christ at the end of time to establish his great and glorious kingdom. But in the meantime, Christians must begin at home, i.e., in their families and churches. Indeed the fate of Europe at the dawn of the sixteenth century looked very dark. The Ottoman Turks were expanding their domination of Europe. Twelve years after the writing of the ninety-five theses of Martin Luther, the Turks laid their first siege against Vienna. Had the Austrian Empire fallen to them, one shudders at what would have happened to the rest of Europe. The Reformation, notwithstanding the unhappy religious wars that followed it, saved Europe, not only from the Turks, but gave the nations that welcomed it the moral and spiritual resources gradually to change all aspects of life.

What are the conclusions of Huntington's thought-provoking book? As Christians who are committed to the supreme and final authority of the Word of God and to the historic Christian tradition, may we accept the underlying thesis of Professor Huntington without any criticism?

Before I venture my own views of *The Clash of Civilizations*, I would like to mention two critiques of Huntington's work. During the Kosovo crisis, Samuel Berger of the National Security Council, ventured a severe criticism of Huntington, dismissing the relevance of the religious affiliation of the Albanians and their allegiance to Islam. He said, and I paraphrase from memory, that the planned NATO intervention would "bury for good the theories of the Harvard professor."

A more serious critique of *The Clash of Civilizations* came from Thomas L. Friedman, the foreign affairs columnist for *The New York Times*. In his latest book, *The Lexus and The Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*, published in 1999, he deals with the impact of the communication revolution on the global scene brought about by the computer and the Internet. He mentions several works that have appeared since the end of the Cold War dealing with the shape of the future. Among them, he refers to Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, and to Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. Friedman makes this observation about both Huntington and Fukuyama:

> While all of these works contained important truths, I think none of them really captured the Post-Cold War world in any holistic way. Huntington saw cultural conflicts around the world and wildly expanded that into an enduring, sharply defined clash of civilizations, even proclaiming that the next world war, if there is one, "will be a war of civilizations." I believe that . . . Huntington vastly underestimated how the power of states, the lure of global markets, the diffusion of technology, the rise of networks and the spread of global norms could trump their black-and-white (mostly black) projections.[7]

Turning to Fukuyama, Friedman considered that his book with the startling title, *The End of History*, "implied finality to this triumph that does not jibe with the world" as I find it.

I do not want to be a harsh critic of Friedman's book. It has excellent chapters that explain the new world of economics in layman's language. Furthermore, I had greatly appreciated his first book published ten years earlier, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, which manifested his genius in reporting about strife-torn Beirut as well as the complicated politics of Israel. However, I don't think that his enthusiasm for the globalization of commerce and communications

negates the centuries-old traditions, say of China, India or the Muslim world. The decade of the 1990s provided us with a miniature of both the possible and probable conflicts that would prevail in the new century.

A new factor must not be neglected. Advocates of multiculturalism make the mere mention of it as a sign of bigotry and racism. I refer to the presence of large and growing minorities of Muslims all over Western Europe and North America. Before the 1950s, Muslims lived mainly in *Daru'l Islam* (i.e., in the Household of Islam). But the population explosion in many parts of their world, coupled with the great demand for labor in Western Europe, brought about the influx of millions of Muslims into Western Europe. Add to that the changed immigration laws that have passed in the USA in the 1960s, which encouraged a similar influx of Muslims into North America. What would be their impact on the lands that allow complete freedoms to all? Would they be able to forget their baggage, their worldview that has never separated religion from politics and culture?

Writing as an historian of civilizations, Samuel Huntington possessed a better vantage point to forecast the future than the young and well-traveled Friedman. In the last chapter of *The Clash*, Huntington writes:

> The overriding lesson of the history of civilizations, however, is that many things are probable, but nothing is inevitable. Civilizations can and have reformed and renewed themselves. The central issue for the West is whether, quite apart from external challenges, it is capable of stopping and reversing the internal process of decay. Can the West renew itself or will sustained internal rot simply accelerate its end and/or subordination to other economically and demographically more dynamic civilizations?[8]

Professor Huntington pointed out in a very frank way

the dangers of existing minorities that do not, or cannot, assimilate into the Western civilizations and their basic values.

> Western culture is challenged by groups within Western societies. One such challenge comes from immigrants from other civilizations who reject assimilation and continue to adhere to and to propagate the values, customs, and cultures of their home societies. This phenomenon is most notable among Muslims in Europe. In Europe, Western civilization could also be undermined of its central component, Christianity. Declining proportions of Europeans profess religious beliefs, observe religious practices, and participate in religious activities. The multiculturalists are, as Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., said, "very often ethnocentric separatists who see little in the Western heritage other than Western crimes." Their "mood is one of divesting Americans of the sinful European inheritance and seeking redemptive infusions from non-Western cultures."[9]

Samuel Huntington has issued a clear warning regarding the disintegration of Western culture. He attributes a major role to Christianity in the development and formation of what is known as Western Civilization. However, he does not adhere to the core of the Christian faith, its foundation on the Holy Scriptures, or the centrality and uniqueness of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ within the Christian tradition. This is no harsh criticism of an eminent teacher who possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of the history of civilizations. But nowhere in my reading of his remarkable work, did I discover any sign of a firm commitment to the historic Christian faith.

I found this book missing a central point of a Christian view of history. Over 1500 years ago, Saint Augustine of North Africa (354-430), wrote his great work, *The City of*

God, in the aftermath of the fall of Rome. He elaborated a philosophy of history that was informed by the Biblical revelation. He emphasized the ultimate triumph of the kingdom of God and the transitory and imperfect nature of all human orders. This great work on a Christian philosophy of history warns us against accepting any utopian scheme, be it religious or secular. But this does not mean that Christians must remain passive as they live in the present world, and ignore the general principles of the Bible that apply to this world and the necessity to work them out in the areas of justice and righteousness.

Furthermore, Christians at the beginning of this new millennium should not hesitate to proclaim that everything good and beautiful in this Western Civilization has had Christian roots. More than ever, their testimony should be bold in rejecting all theories and policies that work for the emergence of a vaguely defined global civilization, fashioned according to the dreams of the multiculturalists and religious pluralists. Had the church in the Apostolic and post-Apostolic ages surrendered to the norms and values of the Roman Empire, Western Civilization, and all its best features, would have never seen the light of day. While praying sincerely the prayer of the early church, "Maranatha, Lord Jesus, come," the church must practice its faith in all the areas and dimensions of life, domestic, ecclesiastical, political, economic, and international. We must proclaim genuine Christianity, based on the uniqueness, finality, and superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ, throughout the globe. While busy working on the earthly manifestations of the City of God, Christians must live their lives in the light of the Christian hope (i.e., waiting patiently and eagerly for the return of the Lord of History). He alone will bring about universal righteousness and lasting peace.

Author

Rev. Bassam Madany was the Arabic Broadcast minister of the Back to God Hour, the radio ministry of the Christian Reformed Church, from 1958 to 1994. His broadcasts are still aired daily to the Arabic-speaking world (North Africa and the Middle East), over international stations. He continues to teach college and seminary courses on both Middle Eastern studies and missions. He also ministers widely through writing in these same disciplines. The author of *The Bible and Islam,* Rev. Madany has previously contributed to *Reformation and Revival Journal.*

Notes

1. Robert Conquest, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 3.
2. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 78.
3. *The Clash,* 81.
4. *Webster's Biographical Dictionary,* Article on Oswald Spengler, 1880-1936 (Springfield, Massachusetts, 1943), 1391.
5. *The Clash,* 82.
6. *The Clash,* 83.
7. Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1999), 17.
8. *The Clash,* 303.
9. *The Clash,* 305.