From "The Clash of Civilizations" to "Civilizational Parallelism"

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Introduction

Talking about civilization is like talking about God. While the aim is to gain knowledge, often the result is only greater obscurity. What is at issue may not be really a concept, but nothing at all. Yet, concepts have their own history, and the UN's inauguration of 2001 as the year of the "dialogue of civilizations," not to mention recent ethno-religious conflicts, has generated new interest in "civilizational" questions — despite the fact that this runs counter to the postmodern aversion to traditional historiography, in favor of "micro-histories,"[1] and objections to

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1.   George Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover, NH: U. of New Hampshire Press, 1997).

the term "civilization" on the ground that it cannot be defined precisely enough.[2]

Most analyses of civilization are vulnerable to charges of technological reductionism (Mumford, Needham), apophatic empiricism (Toynbee), cultural-ism (Ricoeur), and the reification of non-Western civilizations and political biases (Hegel). Said has exposed the Eurocentrism of most Western accounts of the Orient. What has remained unexamined, however, is how various distortions of Orientalist (and counter-Orientalist) accounts can be better understood from the viewpoint of competing civilizations[3] and of the spatio-temporal location of their proponents.[4] As such, the much lamented difficulty of the West in approaching Islam objectively appears both logical and even rational.[5]

The renewal of interest in "civilizations" is inhibited by the explosion of liter-ature on globalization which, by and large, depicts a process of de-differentiation and increased integration culminating in a world civilization. Historically, this lit-erature has been preceded by modernization literature, often heralding a Western-sponsored universal "Westernization." In both cases, the world's *telos* of cohering

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2.   Hans J. Morgenthau dismissed "civilization" on the ground that it is not suscepti-ble to empirical verification. See M. F. Ashley Montagu, ed., *Toynbee and History: Critical Essays and Reviews* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1956), p. 96. Toynbee argued the opposite, i.e., that civilizations, like epochs, are conceptual wholes corresponding to empirical enti-ties. See Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Volume 12 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 231-33. Thus, he has focused on the "challenge and response" of civilizations, both past and present. From Toynbee's viewpoint, history appears as the march of compet-ing civilizations, which are somehow distinguished from "barbarism." See also Paul Ricoeur, *Truth and History* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965), p. 87. Unlike Ricoeur, Mumford and Needham opt for a more technological definition: "The regu-larization of time, the increase in mechanical power, the multiplication of goods, the con-traction of time and space, the standardization of performance and product, the transfer of skill to automata, and the increase of collective interdependence — these, then, are the chief characteristics of our machine civilization. They are the basis of the particular forms of life and modes of expression that distinguish Western Civilization, at least in degree, from the various earlier civilizations that preceded it." See Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civiliza-tion* (New York: Harcourt, 1934), p. 281; and Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, Seven Vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954).

3.   Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). Said over-states his case and neglects to consider that historians such as Toynbee anticipated his crit-icisms of bias of Western scholarship on Islam: "The prevalent depreciation of Islam in the West is a relic of the anti-Islamic Christian prejudice. This stubbornly survives even in modern Western minds that feel an obligation, in their intellectual work, to correct the Christian bias in their cultural heritage, and that imagine themselves in their unfavorable appraisal of Islam, to be acting up to their own high standard of detachment and to be con-demning Islam objectively, on its own merits." *A Study of History, op. cit.*, p. 472.

4.   See Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction* (Stoney Brooks, New York: N. Hays, 1978), p. 114.

5.   Montgomery Watt, *Islam and Christianity Today* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983); and *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh University Press, 1985), p. 162.

into one macro (syncretic or Western) civilization forms a dominant tendency, with one group hailing the outcome, i.e., a "global village," as the institutionalization of reason, and another bemoaning it as the triumph of neo-colonialism.[6] This post-Cold War world order's embroilment in a complex web of civilizational frictions and hostilities has been aptly theorized by Samuel Huntington.

The "Clash of Civilizations" Thesis Revisited

Huntington's writings on the "clash of civilizations"[7] has generated a great deal of interest in the West and even more in the East among the Third World intelligentsia, some of whom have viewed it as yet another exercise in monological "Orientalism."[8] Yet, the idea of a "clash of civilizations" does not necessarily preclude dialogue. "Clash of civilizations" and "dialogue of civilizations" are not contradictory. The stereotypical romantic view that "dialogue" inherently promotes intercultural understanding is dismissed by Huntington's tracing of "clash of civilizations" to the rapid increase in global communication heightening local cultures' awareness of their differences and implicating them in "civilizational" consciousness, solidarity and, eventually, rival projects.[9] While calling attention to difficulties in securing meaningful consensus through interaction among "civilizational" constellations, Huntington's view carries the burden of showing that increased civilizational interaction involves neither shared understanding nor interest in reconciliation. This is born in large measure by a blunt portrayal of global hierarchies featuring Western civilization's unprecedented concentration of power and the concomitant reification of "global harmony," whereby the "world community" has become a smokescreen for the "global legitimacy to actions reflecting the interests of the United States and other Western powers," which manipulate international institutions to protect their hegemonic interests.[10]

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6. See Kiyoshi Shimizu, "The Dialectics of Globalization: Whose Globalization Is It Anyway?" *Mershon International Studies Review*, Vol. 40 (Oct. 1996), pp. 266-272.

7. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72 (Summer 1993).

8. E.g., Roy P. Mottahedeh, "The Clash of Civilization Thesis," *Harvard Middle East and Islamic Review,* Vol. 2, No. 2 (Autumn 1995), pp. 1-27. See also Fred Dallmayr, *Alternative Visions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), Chapter 12.

9. See Reuel Howe, *The Miracle of Dialogue* (New York: Seabury Press, 1963); Jamie Phelps, *More Light, Less Heat: How Dialogue Can Transform Christian Conflicts into Growth* (San Francisco: Joseph-Bass Books, 1999); Jerald D. Gort *et al*, *Dialogue and Syncretism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991); Donald K. Swearer, *Dialogue: The Key to Understanding Other Religions* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977). Swearer distinguishes between dialogue carried out within a philosophical framework to which language of faith is referred and the dialogue aimed at comparing religions' symbolic systems.

10. Huntington, "Clash of Civilizations," *op. cit*., p. 39-40. Huntington has a static view of culture as "a series of processes that construct, reconstruct, and dismantle cultural materials. . . . The concepts of a fixed, stationary and bounded culture must give way to a sense of the fluidity and permeability of cultural sets." Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

Huntington comes dangerously close to endorsing ossified Third Worldist caricatures of the UN and other international institutions as mere pawns of the West. These views undervalue the facts that Third World nations have been successful in influencing the transnational institutions, in which they have participated and that the UN and other similar institutions such as the World Trade Organization, provide important forums for strategic, diplomatic, and economic dialogue among nations.[11] Absent in Huntington is any discussion of how the complex interdependence of nations,[12] as well as consensus-generating coordinating mechanisms such as the UN,[13] can buffer clashing civilizations. Huntington's theory must demonstrate that intra-civilizational communication is tied to strategic, i.e., success-oriented interests. In his intermeshing of economic and cultural explanations for a coming "clash of civilizations," Huntington retains a purely utilitarian notion of interest. His diagnosis of a growing, culture-based fragmentation supplanting the ideological cleavages readily extrapolates a concretization of cultural cleavages into programmatic action termed civilizational. But where is the evidence for the congealment of, say, Latino culture threatening the West? Has not the Latin "other" become so familiar as to look like the "same"? In what sense, then, is there a distinct Latin civilization or, for that matter, an Islamic one?

There are reasons to question Huntington's response that his civilizations are "meaningful entities" and that religious discord is the linchpin of clashing civilizations.[14] Thus, Sowell has argued that "often religious labels distinguish groups whose real differences are ethnic or cultural." His discussion of "cultural diffusion" leads him to postulate "the emergence of the elements of a common world culture."[15] This is related to a whole set of questions[16] that besiege the "civilization"

11.   See Stephen D. Krasner, *Structural Conflict: The Third World Against Global Liberalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); also, Afrasiabi, "Iran and the World Trade Organization," *The Middle East Executive Report* (December 1995).

12.   See Robert S. Keohane and Joseph Nye, Jr., *eds., Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little Brown, 1977).

13.   James N. Rosenau, ed., *Governance without Government: Order and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

14.   "Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and, most important, religion." "Clash of Civilizations," *op. cit.*, p. 24. From a Huntingtonian perspective, one may ask if Israel, notwithstanding its distinct history, religious melange, etc., represents a new civilization.

15.   Thomas Sowell, *Conquests and Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), p. 478.

16.   Against Huntington, here one can use Toynbee's observation that the Andean civilization has been subsumed by the West, and that Iran has a distinct civilization not subsumable under the Islamic rubric. See Toynbee, *A Study of History, op. cit.*, p. 169: "The Islamic civilizations in the Iranic and Arabic worlds are therefore two more separate civilizations, on a par with the two Christian civilizations of Byzantium and the West." See also Kaveh Afrasiabi, *After Khomeini: New Directions in Iran's Foreign Policy* (Boulders, CO: Westview, 1994); and Sandra Mackey, *The Iranians* (New York: Plume, 1995). Mackey, however, exaggerates the congruence of Iran's pre-Islamic and Islamic heritages, and reduces their tensions to "a perpetual tension between the transcendental and the mundane." *Ibid.*, p. 378.

enterprise: How are the various elements, culture, language, religion, etc. organized in the "historical ensembles" called civilizations? Should religious processes be privileged in studying today's civilizations?

A related problem is Huntington's conceptualization of the West as bereft of any meaningful Islamic presence.[17] Clinging to a homogenous notion of "the West," Huntington prefigures a highly unlikely "de-Westernization"[18] of the US due to the on-going influx of Hispanic and other minorities, raising the specter of an "internal clash of civilizations." Similarly, his warning about a "coming clash of civilizations" coincides with the immediate aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet Union and the rise of several new nations grappling with the issues of identity-formation. As Aron noted, "Any contact of societies or civilizations leads first to the shock of contradictory manifestations, from which mutual lack of understanding comes."[19] If so, could Huntington have mistaken the initial shock of post-Cold War transition, marked with the development of new nationalisms, for a stubborn longitudinal pattern? Where is the scientific basis for Huntington's claim of historical clairvoyance regarding the future destiny of world society? What Huntington perceives as an endemic, long-term form of global conflict may be little more than a transitional phenomenon signalling the arrival of civilizational harmony instead of clash and conflict — not unlike the history of the Western civilization itself where "the bleakest chapters of Christian fratricidal history recounts the struggles between Catholics and Protestants."[20]

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17. He subdivides Islamic civilization into "Arabic, Turkic and Malay." This leaves out both Iran and Indonesia and ignores that, given the immense presence in medieval and modern Europe of Islamic culture, it is misleading to speak of Western culture as non-Islamic, i.e., Islam's "hostile other." See Jon Alexander and Giles Dimock, eds., *Religion in Western Civilization* (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 1987); and Jan Kinney, *Islam as Other* (Chicago: Institute of Islamic Information and Education, 1980).

18. Samuel P. Huntington, "If not Civilizations, What?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 5 (Nov-Dec. 1993), p. 190. While Huntington's "internal clash of civilizations" makes no sense for the US, it fits well contemporary Iran, harboring both pre-Islamic and Islamic heritages, while official ideology is purely Islamic and vehemently opposed to pre-Islamic popular culture. A genuine, internal dialogue of civilizations in that country, then, may undermine the government's legitimacy, insofar as it has hitherto been unable to deal with the Persian heritage. A clue to the government's culture war emerged during a recent New Year celebration attracting thousands of Iranians to the ruins of Persopolis. The government cancelled the celebrations, following the leader's denouncement of the ruins as having "no spiritual significance" and containing "vestiges of the deposed monarchy." Reported by Associated Press (New York, March 22, 1999).

19. Raymond Aron, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 72.

20. Paul M. Minus, Jr., *The Catholic Rediscovery of Protestantism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), p. 11. Minus writes that as a result of increased encounter, "Protestants not only saw Catholics in a new light but also enabled Catholics to view them in a like manner." *Ibid.*, p. 111. As Moltmann and Küng have pointed out, Huntington ignores the paradoxical state of intra-civilizational relations. See Jürgen Moltmann and Hans Küng, *Islam — A Challenge to Christianity* (Rome: Concilium: 1994) p. vii.

An Alternative: "Civilizational Parallelism"

The advantage of talking about "civilizational parallelism" rather than "the clash of civilizations" is that it does not superimpose any telos on the historical process. Instead, it is open-ended and limits itself to the delineation of the limits and nuances of parallel civilizations, such as the various ramifications of unprecedented intra-cultural exposure in today's internetted world. Nor does it jump to the conclusion, as Huntington seemingly does, of identifying every difference as a mark of separation. Another advantage is that "civilizational parallelism" allows for discontinuity, disjunction and lack of fit *vis-à-vis* the cultural patterns of interaction among the world's civilizations. Such an insight is a prerequisite for understanding how, e.g., Hindu civilization, despite its largely Westernized polity and its position in the North-South nexus, does not present a conflictual challenge to Western civilization, and how its distinct cultural identity does not implicate the continent's population in a revolt against the West.[21]

Huntington's bold sub-thesis of "the West versus the rest" leaves only recourse to stratagems, dislocating the dictates of civilizations from the realm of free and circulating exchange of ideas to the level of power and antagonism. Thus, the theory ends up terminally embroiled in power politics. In addition, the "West versus the rest" thesis must prove that other civilizational conflicts, e.g., between the Slavic and Islamic peoples, are secondary, and that they still form a nexus against the West. Huntington's over-generalization regarding the strategic deployment of indigenous cultures in the service of civilizational conflict with other civilizations, principally the West, harbors an a priori assumption concerning these civilizations' cultural and political fit, thus foreclosing the scenario of a civilizational conflict with the West solely on the economic and power fronts or, vice versa, on the cultural or religious front.

The alternative notion of "civilizational parallelism" emphasizes the differential relationality of civilizations along their various dimensions. Guarding against any conflation of levels of analysis and premature foreclosure of questions that need to remain open, i.e., benign confrontation instead of warfare, this perspective even entertains the viability of a "clash of civilizations" as a possibility co-existing with other possibilities, including the permanent co-extensiveness and or gradual convergence of various civilizations through the economy, politics, culture, religion, and the like. According to Huntington, civilizations are differentiated from each other by religion and "people of different civilizations have different views on relations between God and man."[22] What is conspicuously absent here is any reference to the positive impact of interreligious interaction.

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21.   See Ram Swarup, *Hindu View of Christianity and Islam* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1992); and K. Singh, "Inter-Faith Dialogue: A Hindu Perspective," in *Interfaith Dialogue and World Community*, ed. by Ch. G.SS. Sreenivasa Rao (Madras, India: Christian Literature Society, 1991).

22.   Huntington, "Clash of Civilizations," *op. cit.,* p. 25.

Inter-theological Dialogue and Religious Parallelism

In the past few decades, recurrent concern for a constructive dialogue among various religious perspectives has undergone inflation.[23] The various Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and other creeds are found to be moving in parallel directions. Thus, the existence of unsuspected realms of shared theological grounds is acknowledged by Cobb, who advocates the idea of mutual creative transformation of religious faiths through internalizations beyond mere dialogue.[24] Recent literature on apocalypticism supports this view.[25]

Related studies of the concepts of God, salvation, free will and divine determination, etc. have found significant similarities among world religions.[26] This underscores the possibility of reaching consensus concerning religious truth — contrary to Vatican II's proclamation on interreligious faith, which limits interreligious dialogue to social ethics, without any possibility of theological reconciliation. The historical proclamation, still in effect, seeks to encourage dialogue, not to change the creeds, but in order to change the believers' attitudes toward other religions, to further global peace.[27] But who can deny that inter-religious dialogue is a theological question and that, consequently, theological dialogue is an inextricable part of the larger dialogue?[28] Can there ever be true religious harmony in the absence of an underlying theological harmony?[29]

The objective of dialogue is the recognition of the other's "otherness," inhibiting violence against apostasy, hereticism, etc. Genuine "interfaith dialogue"[30]

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23. For a summary of the issue, see, Marcus Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope: One Hundred Years of Global Interfaith Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

24. Thus, Cobb has shown that both Christianity and Mahyana Buddhism can transform one another, and apparent contradictions between them can turn into complementary contrasts. See John Cobb, "Being a Transformationist in a Pluralistic World," *Christian Century,* vol. 111, no. 23 (1994); and Gavin D'costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986). The problem with Cobb is that he de-emphasizes the clash-neutralizing parallelism of theologies and, instead, focuses only on transformism.

25. See *Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* (New York: Continuum, 1998), Vol. 1, p. 80.

26. See, e.g., Abdoldjavad Falaturi, *et al. Three Ways to the One God: The Faith Experience in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New York: Crossroad, 1987); Mark S. Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995).

27. *Dialogue & Proclamation, Pontifical Council For Interreligious Dialogue* (Rome: Vatican City, 1991).

28. This point bypasses William al-Sharif in his "Christianity and Islam: Towards a Civilizational Dialogue," in *The Bulletin,* vol. 15, no. 2 (January-June 1996), pp. 66-83.

29. According to Küng, "There can be no dialogue between religions without research into theological foundations." See Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1992), p. 105.

30. See Martin Buber, "Genuine Dialogue and the Possibilities of Peace," in R. Anderson *et al.*, eds., *The Reach of Dialogue* (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 1996), p. 87. See also David Bohn, "Transforming the Culture Through Dialogue," *Utne Reader* (Mar/Apr. 1991); Lawrence Terrfs, "Finding a Shared Meaning: Reflections on Dialogue," *Seeds of Unfolding*, Vol. V, No. XI (1994), pp. 4-10; Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?* (New York: Orbis, 1985).

means reaching out to other faiths and establishing vital relations, to "make a valid place for the other religions within one's faith."[31] In this dialogue, the religious "other" becomes a real part of one's life. Perhaps it is not theology, but spirituality which provides the nucleus of interfaith learning.[32] Interfaith dialogue, however, has a conformist side, insofar as it has had the "authentic" identity-generating consequence of entrenching the participants in their particular perspective, e.g., the problem of religious fundamentalism. It carries the seeds of both fundamentalist "monologism" as well as a "dialogical imperative," i.e., "entering into relationships marked by openness, honesty, and the search for understanding."[33] What matters most about the similarity of certain theological frameworks is that it denotes the existence of common ground for a meaningful dialogue between their adherents. A positive affirmation of similarities does not require full agreement or the capitulation of one side to the other. A mutual recognition of theological differences through the acknowledgment of their similarities would then be the springboard for religious parallelism, benign competition, as well as reverence for the other side's beliefs.

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31.   Allan Diogenes, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern Word* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989), p. 188. According to the author, the themes of incarnation and salvation in Christianity and Hinduism contain vital differences and yet are concerned with the same question.

32.   See, e.g., Tosh Arari and Wesley Ariarajah, eds., *Spirituality in Interfaith Dialogue* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1989). Emphasizing "plurality of spiritualities," these authors find a ready-made stream of connectedness in a spontaneous dialogue between the Christian monk, Islamic sufi and the Buddhist mystic. See also Seyed Hossain Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1970); Schuon Frithjof, *The Transcendental Unity of Religions* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1953).

33.   David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative* (New York: Orbis, 1988), p. 85. Such a symbiotic relation is discernible in the works of the Muslim theosophist Suhrawardi and the Christian theologian Jürgen Moltmann, particularly with respect to their preoccupation with divine light, their shift from being to light, and their theologizing on God and His indwelling on Earth. See Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "Communicative Theory and Theology: A Reconsideration," *Harvard Theological Review* (January 1998).