

The Sexual Clash of Civilizations

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As events were soon to demonstrate, this “universal civilization” did not come to pass. To the contrary, the fissures of our contemporary conflicts tend to fall precisely along civilizational lines. The great prophet of civilizational conflict is Harvard professor Samuel P. Huntington, whose seminal 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, set the terms for a debate that, in our post 9/11 world, is still very much on the front burner.

Rejecting the idea of any comprehensive global civilization, Huntington argued that a clash between civilizations is the primary cause of conflict on the global scene today. While acknowledging that virtually all civilizations hold certain shared beliefs, Huntington argues that these beliefs are minimal and clearly insufficient to avoid deadly conflict.

Huntington, who directs the John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies and also serves as chairman of the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies, was director of security planning for the National Security Council during the Carter administration. His book and thesis set the table for a scholarly debate that raged on college campuses until it became a concern to millions on September 11, 2001.

Huntington argues that the West “is and will remain for years to come the most powerful civilization.” Yet, Huntington sees Western power declining relative to other civilizations. Even as the West seeks to assert its worldview and interests, non-Western societies challenge its power and dominance.

As Huntington sees the world, the current pattern is a global structure of seven or eight major civilizations, each competing for its own interest and values. As he explains, the leading countries of the world represent different civilizations as well as different interests.

The potential for conflict becomes clear: “The local conflicts most likely to escalate into broader wars are those between groups and states from different civilizations. The predominant patterns of political and economic development differ from civilization to civilization. The key issues on the international agenda involve difference among civilizations. Power is shifting from the long predominant west to non-Western civilizations. Global politics has become multipolar and multicivilizational.” Other scholars and strategic thinkers have argued with details in Huntington’s analysis. Nevertheless, the basic structure of his argument is difficult to refute.

If any one civilizational conflict appears most likely to escalate into a broader threat to world peace, Huntington points to the clash between the West and the Islamic civilization.

As Bernard Lewis, another formidable scholar of world affairs, comments: “It should now be clear that we are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no

less than a clash of civilizations—that perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the world-wide expansion of both.”

What Lewis identifies as “our secular present” may represent the greatest flash point of conflict.

In a fascinating article published earlier this year in the journal Foreign Policy, researchers Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris argue that the real clash between civilizations is not about democracy—but sex.

Inglehart and Norris insist that some concept of democracy is claimed now by almost every government and regime. Peoples throughout the world claim to desire democracy and to want political freedom. Yet, at the same time, the actual content and character of democracy is very much up for grabs.

In “The True Clash of Civilizations,” Inglehart and Norris state their case: “Although nearly the entire world pays lip service to democracy, there is still no global consensus on the self-expression values—such as social tolerance, gender equality, freedom of speech, and interpersonal trust—that are crucial to democracy. Today, these divergent values constitute the real clash between Muslim societies and the West.”

Inglehart and Norris base their argument on data from two different periods covered by the World Values Survey [WVS], covering the years 1995-96 and 2000-2002. The WVS explores worldview beliefs and values in more than 70 countries. According to Inglehart and Norris, “the WVS is an investigation of sociocultural and political change that encompasses over 80 percent of the world’s population.”

According to the data from the WVS reports, culture determines values. But, where Huntington pointed to a worldwide clash over political values, Inglehart and Norris argue that “the real fault line between the West and Islam … concerns gender equality and sexual liberalization.” Or, as these researchers assert, “the values separating the two cultures have more to do with eros than demos.”

The clearest evidence for this fundamental clash is seen in the radical difference between the sexual mores found in the modern West and those of the Islamic world. As has been well documented in the rantings of Osama Bin Laden, many Muslims see the sexual permissiveness of American culture [joined by the rest of the West] as a sign of a terminal sickness at the heart of western civilization.

On issues ranging from marriage to divorce to abortion to homosexuality and to the role of men and women, a vast chasm now separates the Islamic world from post-Christian societies in the West.

Inglehart and Norris also point to a basic conflict over the role of religious authority within the civilizations. The separation of religious and secular authorities in the secularized West is not a pattern admired by the Islamic masses or their leaders. The decline of Christianity’s binding authority in Europe and North America is all the evidence many Muslims need to know that western-style democracy is not a future they will chose.

This thesis of a sexual clash of civilizations points to realities far more complicated than the clash between the secular West and Islam. The furor over the consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson as the first openly-homosexual bishop in a major denomination [Episcopal Church, USA] reveals a sexual clash of civilizations within Christianity itself. The leaders of the opposition movement against the normalization of homosexuality in the Anglican Communion are from what is known as the “Global South”, encompassing Africa, southern Asia, and much of South America.

At the same time, this conflict is about more than geography. Christian believers committed to biblical orthodoxy throughout North America and western Europe, though dwindling in number, still hold tenaciously to biblical morality and patterns of sex and marriage—even against the liberalizing tendencies of some branches of institutional Christianity.

Perhaps the most interesting civilizational conflict is found at the fault-lines between orthodox Christianity and the secular world. When it comes to the destruction of the family, the undermining of marriage, and the unleashing of eros into sexual anarchy, the “true believers” remaining in Christendom have found what amounts to a bridge too far.

Inglehart and Norris are undoubtedly right when pointing to a sexual clash of civilizations as an important global reality. What they missed is a sexual clash of civilizations found right here at home, where millions of Americans share a

fundamental hope for democracy, but inhabit different worlds when it comes to sexual morality.

You do not have to go around the world to find a sexual clash of civilizations. Just turn on your television.

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