



After September 11, 2001: Clash of Civilizations or Dialogue?

Lecture by

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C o n t e n t s

- (I) The concept of the “clash of civilizations” in the global context
- (II) The ideological background of the present antagonistic discourse on civilizations
- (III) The philosophical alternative to the “clash” of civilizations”

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Introductory remarks

The tragic events of September 11, 2001 have suddenly brought the Islamic civilization to the focus of the Western world's attention – in a way that fits into the kind of the enemy stereotype created by Samuel Huntington's essay of 1993 on "The Clash of Civilizations." Unfortunately, the recent developments have been exploited for the sake of a "cultural crusade" against Islam and for the creation of a new geostrategic design according to which the West and its dominating power, the United States, has the right, even duty, to "pacify" the Muslim world according to Western standards of humanity and secularism. At the beginning of the 21st century, the world has entered into a new phase of the struggle for global hegemony, this time again centered around issues of religion and civilization. Because of the events of September 11 and their attribution to a particular religious community or civilization, the ongoing global debate on a "dialogue" between civilizations, and between Islam and the West in particular, has become extremely emotional, at times even irrational.¹

In this emotionally charged atmosphere, it is the special task of philosophy to try to analyze the underlying causes of civilizational conflict sine ira et studio, i.e. with an attitude that takes into account the actual escalation of inter-civilizational tensions, but at the same time is detached from the level of mere agitation.

(I) The concept of the "clash of civilizations" in the global context

Since the end of the East-West conflict, several new *tópoi* have been launched by those who dominate the global discourse as the presumed winners of the ideological and power struggles of the Cold War. Immediately after the collapse of the Socialist bloc, the "end of history as such" was declared by a strategist of the US State Department.² This strange Hegelian conception of historical "progress" was taken up by President George Bush – who enforced this "eschatological" trend by reviving the old term, used by the former adversaries of the US during the last World War, of the "New World Order" at the beginning of the Gulf

¹ On the ideological and geostrategic background of recent developments see the International Progress Organization's *Baku Declaration on Global Dialogue and Peaceful Co-existence among Nations and Threats Posed by International Terrorism*. Baku (Azerbaijan), 9 November 2001.

² Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History," in *The National Interest*, vol. 16 (Summer 1989), pp. 3-18.

War in 1991.³ (This “New World Order” has been propagated by the very same leaders who consistently had rejected the United Nations’ proposal for the establishment of a “New International Economic Order.”) The “Clash of Civilizations” is one of the latest products of the Western world’s legitimization discourse in the post-Cold War era. The term was originally coined by Bernard Lewis,⁴ an American “orientalist” (in the sense of the term defined by Edward Said) with anti-Islamic bias, and later adopted by Samuel Huntington in the framework of his analysis of the present international system that supports the global rule of the United States as the leader of the Western world.⁵ Since September 11, 2001 Huntington’s thesis is even more forcefully propagated on a global level and put in the context of a new “crusade” (a term used by President George W. Bush shortly after the September 11 attacks).

This new paradigm of civilizational conflict being the source of the global dynamics of power in a post-ideological world (whose “post-modern” character is increasingly becoming doubtful) has been eagerly picked up by former “cold warriors” who are used to thinking in *polemical* terms. The slogans and the media campaign propagating it have antagonized large sectors of the population in the so-called “Third World,” particularly in the Islamic countries, and have alienated them from the West.

It is a frequently expressed view that the “West”, led by the United States, is simply creating a new enemy stereotype after the demise of communism as the main rival of capitalism in the form of so-called liberal democracy. The ideological “other” is supposedly being replaced by the ethnic and cultural “other.” Generally, the enemy in the set-up of the New World Order is seen in the category of culture, or of civilization,⁶ i.e. of a particular value system and life-style related to it and not so much in the shape of a rival political ideology. Religion seems to play a special role in this context of the revival of historical Eurocentric stereotypes. (Those, in the present time, relate to the “West” in general, i.e. include the United States and Europe.) The postmodern critique of the “subject” and all that is related to it seem to vanish in this revival of collective identities and stereotypes that relate to the *collective subjectivity* of the nation or tribe.

³ Address to the Nation, 16 January 1991. For a more detailed analysis see Hans Köchler, *Democracy and the New World Order*. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1993.

⁴ “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” in *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 266, September 1990, p. 60.

⁵ Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” in *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3, Summer 1993, pp. 22-49.

⁶ See Samuel Huntington’s definition of civilization as “the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species.” (op. cit., p. 24)

Capitalism in the form of “liberal democracy” now seems to be elevated to a quasi-religious level, in a kind of “civilizational apotheosis” brought about by the former advocates of the Cold War turned into propagators of civilizational struggle. As a surrogate of religious dogma it is perceived to be representative of the Western cultural heritage as such, eventually replacing the Christian worldview in its claim for universal validity. This messianic aspect of the new hegemonic discourse is becoming evident in the most recent *tópos*, that of *globalization*.⁷ The associated terms and/or slogans of “liberal democracy,” “free market economy,” etc. all relate to the unrivalled rule of interest groups in the name of democracy (in the framework of the Western representative model of democracy which, in basic respects, can be equated to elite rule)..

It is no wonder that this universal claim, connected with very specific economic interests, has caused serious concern among those “at the end of the receiving line” as it was recently put by the Egyptian Minister of Culture, Farouk Hosni: “The issue of globalisation has imposed itself on the dialogue between cultures. ... It reflects the beliefs, aspirations and culture of one party that always acted as the exporter of cultural trends, political ideologies and economic problems ...”⁸ For many in the developing world, “globalization” has become the keyword for the ideological and cultural “imperialism” of the West.

Beneath the surface of the new global discourse on “cultural clashes” being the determining factor of international relations at the end of the 20th century we discover the old hegemonic scheme of European power politics from the era of imperialism and, later, colonialism.⁹ This concept of politics is exclusively based on the notion of the “national interest.” The “neo-imperialistic notion of a clash of civilizations” as it is described in a critique of Huntington’s thesis,¹⁰ in its self-righteousness and ideological zeal resembles the spirit of medieval European crusades against the “usurpators” of the rule in the Holy Land and

⁷ The Islamic thinker Ahmed Kamal Abul-Magd characterizes globalization as a “new religion.” Cf. the article by Omayma Abdel-Latif “West vs the rest?” in *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 16-22 April 1998, p. 2.

⁸ Quoted in *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 16-22 April 1998, p. 2.

⁹ Cf. the critique of Huntington’s Eurocentric theory and “culturalism” in general by Samir Amin, *Die Zukunft des Weltsystems. Herausforderungen der Globalisierung* [original title: *Les défis de la mondialisation*]. Hamburg: VSA-Verlag, 1997, pp. 132ff.

¹⁰ “The Plight of Islam in Europe” in *Telepolis, heise online* (Verlag Heinz Heise, Hanover [1998]), at <http://www.ix.de/tp/english/inhalt/te/1084/2.html>.

in southern and eastern Europe.¹¹ The post-modern version of the historical confrontationist doctrine of Christian Europe seems to be the “cultural” or “civilizational crusade” being declared by the self-appointed guardians of Western interests against supposed threats to the West’s cherished “liberal” lifestyle, even to its very existence as an independent grouping of political entities sharing the same civilization. Huntington and his followers identify these threats as coming from Eastern civilizations such as Islam and Confucianism. They even go as far as to construe a “Confucian-Islamic military connection” which they characterize as “a renegades’ mutual support pact” (Dave McCurdy) that is supposedly going to “challenge Western interests, values and power.”¹² The large-scale propagation of this doctrine – particularly as concerns Islam – since September 11, can be seen as integral part of a long-term strategy of re-colonization.

Connected with this thesis of a universal threat to Western identity and existence is a new version of “missionary” ideology of the West in regard to the basic principles of human rights, democracy and free-market economy as expressed in the globalization slogan.

What is needed in the present international constellation, is a *paradigm change* in the theory of international relations in general – away from the cynicism of the so-called “realist” theory which always has served the hegemonial interests (whether they were those of the European concert of powers in the 19th century or those of the only superpower at the beginning of the 21st century).

(II) The ideological background of the present antagonistic discourse on civilizations

On the political level, or more precisely, on the level of political theory, one should investigate the *real* factors behind the dynamics of relations between states and governments. Those factors may well be primarily economic and social. The old debate between political

¹¹ For more details see the author’s paper “Muslim-Christian Ties in Europe: Past, Present and Future.” *Second International Seminar on Civilizational Dialogue: “Japan, Islam and the West.”* University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 2-3 September 1996.

¹² Samuel Huntington, op. cit., pp. 46f. The Malaysian political scientist Chandra Muzaffar, in his comment “The Clash of Civilisations or Camouflaging Dominance?”, rejects the notion of a Confucian-Islamic connection as a “myth propagated by people like Huntington to justify increased US military spending in the post cold war era.” (Published at <http://csf.colorado.edu/mail/revs/sp96/0035.html> on 4 March 1996.)

“realists” such as Hans Morgenthau¹³ and the advocates of an “idealist” theory of international relations¹⁴ is to be seen in this context.

It may well be that cultural differences, in the specific context of “globalization” with the unipolar power structure associated with it, are becoming a kind of magnifying glass of economic differences, or more precisely a legitimizing concept for the exercise of hegemonic power that is supposedly threatened by those who represent a “different” value system. In an era where the gap between the rich and economically disadvantaged countries is getting wider, the roots of many international tensions and conflicts may be seen in conflicting interests that can primarily be defined in economic terms. The adjective “cultural” often serves as a kind of *rationalization* for the respective confrontationist scheme that is derived from the interest to gain the upper hand in international commercial exchanges. Culture often serves as a cover behind which the real motives and economic interests are hidden, giving them the “idealistic” outlook that is needed for legitimization purposes.

This can best be exemplified in the conflict between the West and Islamic countries over the control of the oil resources in the Middle East. What is a simple conflict of economic interests is portrayed as historical confrontation between the West and the Islamic world as such. The emphasis on civilizational difference, the dictum of a threat to Western civilization, serves to legitimize the aggressive pursuit of economic interests in distant regions. Threats are being artificially construed against which the West supposedly has to defend itself in order to secure its very survival. A brute and simple conflict of economic interests is thus being blown up to a “clash of civilizations.” The underlying crusader ideology creates a kind of vicious circle of self-enforcing enemy stereotypes that may well lead to self-fulfilling prophecies of major conflicts in the future. As put by A. J. Bacevich of the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, “the imagery of clashing civilizations does possess real and potentially explosive emotional resonance.”¹⁵ In his critique of Samuel Huntington’s basic notion, Bacevich expresses his concern that Huntington “puts the stamp of respectability on fears all too easily twisted into bigotry.” He states that “*The Clash of Civilizations* could inadvertently serve the cause of intolerance, racism, and xenophobia.”¹⁶

¹³ *Politics Among Nations*. New York: Knopf, 1960.

¹⁴ Cf. Georg Schwarzenberger, *Über die Machtpolitik hinaus?* Hamburg: Hansischer Verlag, 1968 [revised German edition].

¹⁵ Book review of Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* in *First Things* 73 (May 1997), pp. 40-45.

¹⁶ Loc. cit.

Because of these political implications, one should try to develop, on the level of cultural theory, a kind of “cultural hermeneutics” that will help us to do away with the old static dialectics of the “us versus the others” from the times of imperialism and Eurocentrism.¹⁷ This dominationist relationship will have to be replaced by a “dialectics of cultural self-comprehension” where the “other” constitutes the *conditio sine qua non* for the shaping of my own cultural and civilizational identity.¹⁸

This *dynamic* dialectics could serve as the basic element of a theory of civilizational encounters after the end of post-war colonialism and after the more recent evaporation of the ideological rivalry between the West and the communist world. Regrettably, the doctrine of civilizational clashes as the basic factors of international relations in the post-Cold War period revives and reinforces the former colonialist pattern of Western supremacy, including cultural superiority, over the rest of the world. In this context, Islam is made a symbol of a civilization challenging the Western lifestyle, even the Western world’s right to exist, and thus getting into conflict with humanity as such. The superior power, in its own understanding, has to defend itself against supposed threats from potential rivals representing “alien” cultures, lifestyles and value systems.

In the absence of a multipolar order (aspired to by all who believe in genuine equality among peoples), the *Eurocentrism* of the old colonialist period is being replaced by the *neocolonialist* rhetoric of the “New World Order” where the emphasis on cultural difference and the threats resulting from it replaces the earlier hegemonic paradigm of the undisputed imperial rule over “inferior” nations. Nowadays, Eurocentrism is veiled in the robes of the defense of one’s own identity and security, even one’s right to exist vis-à-vis threats from other civilizations.

This “post-modern” version of the old colonial enemy stereotype is rapidly gaining ground in the West’s discourse on its relations, strategic and otherwise, with the Islamic world. Samuel Huntington’s phrase of the “bloody borders” of Islam¹⁹ is no slip of the tongue,

¹⁷ Cf. the analysis of the author, *Philosophical Foundations of Civilizational Dialogue. The Hermeneutics of Cultural Self-Comprehension versus the Paradigm of Civilizational Conflict*. Third Inter-Civilizational Dialogue: “Civilizational Dialogue: Present Realities, Future Possibilities.” University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 15-17 September 1997.

¹⁸ Cf. Hans Köchler (ed.), *Cultural Self-comprehension of Nations*. Tübingen/Basel: Erdmann, 1978.

¹⁹ Op. cit., p. 35.

it drastically exemplifies the emotions shaping this new self-assertion of the West vis-à-vis the rest of the world. What we see here, particularly after the events of September 11, is the revival of the old perceptions of a threat emanating from the Muslim world (since the times of the Ottoman Empire's repeated incursions into the territory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). This particular phrase has had a great impact on academia and public opinion in the whole Western world. "Orientalists" (in the sense defined by Edward Said)²⁰ and self-declared experts on Islam have only too willingly subscribed to this view according to which the Muslim civilization is blamed for any confrontation it finds itself involved in.²¹ Referring to Huntington, one of the authors states that Islam "will continue to clash with its culturally different neighbors causing more bloodshed" and that the "only time fighting ends is when Islam gains the territory ..."²² Such a view of Islam "as something cancerous to global stability" is characterized by critics of this antagonistic approach as a "perfect replacement" of the former Soviet threat in the context of the Cold War.²³

(III) The philosophical alternative to the "clash" of civilizations

For the philosophical observer faced with this new confrontationist discourse on the global level (for which the dealing with Islam is the most drastic example) it is of high priority to lay the ground for the above-mentioned cultural hermeneutics as a contribution to a new *interdisciplinary* approach towards the issues of politics and civilization. Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of the "horizon of understanding" (*Verständnishorizont*) may serve as the framework for such a theory that could contribute to a new discourse on civilizational encounters.²⁴

Irrespective of the dominationist scheme described earlier, a civilization can only fully develop itself if it is able to relate to other civilizations. Self-comprehension on the individual and collective levels is only possible on the basis of a distinction from another self. In this

²⁰ *Orientalism*. Reprint ed., New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

²¹ Cf. Stephen W. Simchak Jr., who develops his claim of the aggressive nature of Islam in reference to Huntington's phrase and who continues, like many other Western scholars, the tradition of anti-Muslim bias derived from a polemical interpretation of Islamic scriptures. The classical *tópos* of this kind of essays is that of the aggressive nature of the concept of *jihad* constituting a threat to the rest of the world. (Comment entitled "Clash of Civilizations," 8 April 1996, at <http://lyco.lycoming.edu/~simstep/clash.html> .)

²² Stephen W. Simchak Jr., loc. cit.

²³ "The Plight of Islam in Europe," loc. cit.

way, the “other” serves as the “corrective” of one’s own understanding of the world and one’s system of values, and not as the adversary against whom to aggressively assert one’s identity and ensure one’s very survival. In the context of this kind of dialectics of cultural awareness, the “other” civilization is the *conditio sine qua non* of the realization and full perception of my own civilization. This hermeneutic necessity correlates to the attitude of respect for the other on an individual basis and tolerance towards one another’s civilization. Such an attitude is the basic requirement for the maturity of any given civilization. The ethical value of tolerance constitutes the precondition for a critical, mature awareness of myself as a social being and of my civilizational background.

There should be no misunderstanding: the fact that I can define myself only *vis-à-vis* the other (as distinct from that which is not myself) does not encourage any aggressive attitude towards that which is “alien” to myself; on the contrary, it requires respect for the other and his distinct perception of reality and cultural value system.

Civilizational dialogue, therefore, is based on a non-subjectivist philosophy of the realization of one’s own self, in the individual and collective sense, through the encounter with different traditions, cultural expressions, value systems and life-styles. Those are seen as an enrichment of one’s own social and cultural awareness, not just as a “tool” to help me define myself. The hermeneutics of civilizational dialogue is based on a perception of the self (whether individual or collective, a person or a community) as shaped by its encounter with that which is distinct from the self. This dynamic process is similar in structure to the dialectics of subject and object as it characterizes human consciousness, whereby, in this context, the “object” of reflection is another subject.²⁵

This philosophical approach (that runs counter to the dogmatism of “enlightened” Western thinking in the sense of its Eurocentric orientation) is one of *dialogue* on the cultural, and *partnership* on the socio-political level. It is to be hoped that at the turn of the millennium the confrontationist paradigm of cultural clashes will be replaced by such a hermeneutic concept of civilizational encounters. Only such a *change of paradigms* would justify the talk

²⁴ For more details see the author’s paper *Philosophical Foundations of Civilizations Dialogue*, loc. cit., and *Cultural-Philosophical Aspects of International Co-operation*. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1978.

²⁵ On the complex normative problems of a multicultural society on the national as well as on the transnational level see Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism and “The Politics of Recognition.”* Ed. Amy Gutmann. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 25-73.

of a “New World Order” replacing the old order of Eurocentrism or the actual order of *pax Americana* in its broadest sense (encompassing not only the military aspect). The perception of cultural threats to the West’s supposedly innocent self-assertion and identity will only eternalize the power balance in the present unipolar system and will generate more conflicts in the future. The *ideological* East-West rivalry has been phased out and is now being replaced by a *civilizational* East-West conflict, represented by the confrontation between the United States, the self-declared leader of the international community, and the Muslim world. This conflict incorporates many elements of the ongoing North-South confrontation over the control of the world’s natural resources and the global distribution of wealth.

After all, there should be no illusion about the dominant role of economic interests shaping present and future relations among the states as the supposedly sovereign actors on the international level. In the era of globalization, philosophers should not allow issues of cultural or civilizational identity to be used for the pursuit of old-fashioned power politics that are exclusively based on the notion of the “national interest.” As history has amply demonstrated, such legitimizing use of culture, particularly religion, may well magnify everyday conflicts of interests beyond the proportions in which they could still be “rationally” controlled. For that reason, intellectuals such as Huntington should not give “credence to apprehensions that the less erudite and articulate have until now quietly nursed.”²⁶ Civilizational legitimization of primarily economic “clashes of interests” may give to an otherwise clearly defined, though undesirable conflict a “metaphysical” dimension the dynamics of which may be hard to confine to the conflict’s original set. This is the *very real danger* consisting in the propagation of the paradigm of the “clash of civilizations.”

Beyond his commitment to mere research, it is the duty of the philosopher to alert the international public to the dangers of such a vicious, self-enforcing circle of conflicting interests and cultural differences. In the era of the arms of mass destruction these threats are of a very real nature. This has been drastically demonstrated by the recent escalation of tensions between the nuclear powers India and Pakistan. The *objective threat* to world peace caused by the sheer size of destructive capacities is magnified and strangely made more real by the *perception of a threat* resulting from the enemy stereotypes that are created by the very propagators of the paradigm of “civilizational clashes.” It is for this reason that we have to expose this paradigm as what it really is: *an ideological scheme for self-enforcing, even self-*

²⁶ A. J. Bacevich, loc. cit.

generating conflict in an ever more complex world where the hegemonic power tries to make use of existing enemy stereotypes and to eventually create new ones to legitimize hegemonic rule in a changing international environment.

To conclude with the words of the I.P.O.'s *Baku Declaration on Global Dialogue and Peaceful Co-existence among Nations* adopted on 9 November 2001:

There is no indispensable nation, but an indispensable need to recognize the inherent right to self-determination of each and every nation and civilization. Whereas the denial of this normative truth may lead to a state of permanent war, its acceptance may open an avenue to the gradual establishment of what Immanuel Kant described as the ideal state of "eternal peace."
