



## **A Clash of Civilizations or Shared Civilization-Building Values: We Must Decide**

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“We could all be dead in twenty minutes, and if we are not dead, there will be nothing to live for, because everyone else will be dead.”

My father spoke these words while our family watched the Cuban missile crisis unfold on a small black-and-white TV in October 1962. He explained that the conflict was not just between two men, Jack Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev, or even between two countries, the US and the Soviet Union; rather, it was between two entirely different ways of life. After that, my father — who had known in World War II the experience of looking into the furious eyes of a man, ten meters away, who had just tried to kill him with a machine gun — said, “It is much easier to start a war than to stop a war.”

More than 30 years later, after the Cold War ended without a nuclear apocalypse, we began to hear about a new “clash of civilizations.” This time, the warnings were coming from distinguished Ivy League scholars such as Bernard Lewis and Samuel P. Huntington.<sup>1</sup> Huntington claimed regarding the conflict between Islam and the West, “The causes ... lie not

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<sup>1</sup> In his 1993 essay “The Clash of Civilizations?” Huntington argued, “Conflict between civilizations will be the latest phase of the evolution of conflict in the modern world” (p. 1). “Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition, and most important, religion” (p. 4). “This centuries-old military interaction between the West and Islam is unlikely to decline” (p. 9). “On both sides the interaction between Islam and the West is seen as a clash of civilizations” (p. 10). *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (Summer, 1993), 22-49. In his 1996 book, Huntington expanded and perhaps modified his explanation of the clash between Islam and the West. “The causes of this ongoing pattern of conflict lie not in transitory phenomena such as twelfth-century Christian passion or twentieth-century Muslim fundamentalism. They flow from the nature of the two religions and the civilizations based on them.” Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 210.



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After reading Lewis and Huntington, I wondered if our world is doomed to continuing conflict between civilizations because of irreducible differences among religions. But as I have listened, over three decades as a Christian leader involved with ethics and human rights issues, to thousands of Christians, Muslims, and representatives of other religions, I have heard very few people say they want conflict and war. Normal people are repulsed by needless death and destruction, even when people of another religious worldview are the victims.

Lewis and Huntington gave us a solemn warning, but they have not predicted a fixed destiny. The future will be shaped by decisions made by many people. Some of these decision makers will be religious leaders, and many more will be influenced by religious worldviews. Accordingly, religious leaders have a unique opportunity to demonstrate how our very different understandings of the divine, God, or the ultimate can lead to shared civilization-building values rather than to bitter conflict.

How can this happen? If we look closely, we will see a crucial, though sometimes unstated, distinction in all prominent religious traditions — namely, a distinction between obligations that apply only to people of our own faith group and those that apply to everybody. For example, as a Protestant Christian, I believe that Christians should attend a Christian church and celebrate communion in remembrance of Jesus' death. I do not tell Muslims or Hindus to take communion, because it is only for people who believe in and wish to proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus. However, I believe that *everyone*, regardless of their religious view, has an obligation to love their neighbor and to practice justice.

Similarly, my Muslim friends would not want me to make a pilgrimage to Mecca; that is only for confessing Muslims. But they see general principles of love and justice as God-given and binding for all people. Like me, Muslims distinguish between religious observance and societal norms, even though they see both as gifts from God.

I believe that we can readily identify shared civilization-building ethical norms among our several religions — shared ethical standards that work against a clash of civilizations in the same way as the right medicine from our doctors can effectively counteract disease in our bodies. I believe that this is a crucial task for "doctors" of any religion.

I propose that we think in terms of *a shared table for the articulation of civilization-building ethical values*, as a way to overcome the *disease of a clash of civilizations*. We can think in terms of *four legs supporting a table of shared moral values*. I will describe each of these four legs and mention how these legs appear within Christianity, in the hope that representatives of other religions will respond by indicating how these four legs of the table of shared norms appear within their religious traditions.

### **The first leg of the table of values: the universal law of humanity**

When we feel guilt, or when we claim someone has done something wrong, we are referencing an unwritten standard, a law above the laws of our society, or a norm that should inform all cultures. Within Christianity, we have traditionally called this the "natural moral law." In our multi-religious societies, we might call it the universal moral law or the law of humanity. In

the Christian Bible, the apostle Paul writes that among all nations people “show that the work of the law is written on their hearts” (Romans 2:1), a clear reference to the law of humanity. This law is not hundreds of pages long. In fact, it can be summed up in a few potentially world-changing sentences: “Do good and avoid evil. Do unto others as you would have them do to you. Love your neighbor as yourself. Do not murder. Do not steal.” I call these central precepts *the guardians of our humanity*. We all know them, regardless of our religion or culture. They form a crucial leg of the table of shared moral norms around which we are sitting. We know these rules simply because we are human.

### **The second leg: respect for human dignity**

The ancient Psalmist asked God, “What is mankind that you are mindful of them, or human beings that you care for them?” He received from God and passed on to us this answer: “You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor” (Psalm 8:4, 5).

As a Christian, I believe that human dignity is a gift from God, given to all people. This dignity is what makes religions possible, since, as far as I know, only humans practice religions. We sense this human dignity when we talk with other people, no matter how different from us they may be. This awareness of shared human dignity has produced the great human rights movements of the last 75 years, in reaction to the horrendous wars and atrocities of the first half of the twentieth century.

In our time, discussions of human rights have often been politicized by various parties and regimes, but this politicizing is possible only because human dignity is real. We all recognize this dignity in ourselves and in other people. It is the second essential foundation of shared moral discussion and of civilized life together.

### **The third leg: protecting foundational human goods**

Scholars of our multiple religions have identified basic human goods that civilizations must value and preserve in order to flourish. For example, the Sunni jurists Imam al-Ghazali (1058 – 1111) and Imam al-Shatibi (1320 – 1388) described five basic human goods — faith, life, progeny, reason, and property — that should be protected by ethical norms and civil laws. They were, I believe, interacting with the Christian philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274), who described the five foundational goods as life, procreation, social life, knowledge, and rational conduct. The words are slightly different, but the two lists are virtually identical in content. These foundations of life are fragile in a way in which the law of gravity is not fragile; they can be destroyed if we do not value and carefully protect them. Christians and Muslims are heirs to a mature understanding of foundational human goods in which others should join.

### **The fourth leg: the practice of virtue, nobility of character, or the fruit of the Spirit**

To respect our neighbors, promote the law of humanity, and protect primary human goods, we need to be the right kind of people. Each person must transition from childish destructiveness toward becoming our best selves, practicing our God-given dignity. Within Christianity, we talk about putting on the fruit of the Spirit, exhibited by such qualities as love, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. Some Muslims talk about learning “nobility of character.” Thoughtful people from many religious traditions describe an “ethic of virtue.” We must train ourselves to embody nobility of character and maturity of moral personality, and this must be a constant theme in our religious communities. If we fail, the alternative is the will

to power and the devastation it brings. This devastation is easy to see, whether in our families or societies or between nations.

### **Conclusion**

Today in Bali we are seated around a table, not only to enjoy hospitality, friendship, and beauty, but also to articulate civilization-building values. I will not be bothered if someone says, "Such a large table needs one or two more legs." Nor will I be concerned if someone proposes to define one of the legs differently. Let the discussion continue! My central point is that independent of our diverse religious rituals and practices, which embody our very different ways of understanding the Ultimate, I believe we can readily envision gathering around a shared table to identify the most fundamental values on the basis of which our societies can truly flourish. Furthermore, I believe we can work together to build and strengthen our understanding and embrace of these shared values, without treating our deep religious differences as insignificant or trying to reduce them to some lowest common denominator. The choice is ours. Will we remain divided and polarized, sitting in our separate corners, or, worse, will we choose the path of religious conflict and civilizational clash? Or: Will we gather together, as one human family, around a common table of shared civilizational values?