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The clash within civilizations

There is some reason to worry that Samuel Huntington's messianic vision of a "clash of civilizations," even though it seemed to many of his commentators to be based on a rather superficial understanding of various parts of the world, might become a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy as a result of the military schemes and actions of the present U.S. government and its coterie of advisers.

What seems the best hope against the prophecy being fulfilled is the fact of a quite different kind of clash, one *within* the civilizations of which Huntington writes. Let me focus on Islam in particular, since it is so much the focus of current events and thinking.

Reflective and knowledgeable people acknowledge and often assert that most Muslims are not absolutists or 'fundamentalists,' to use the more misleading term. Even the president of the United States said so repeatedly in waging wars

against two countries with predominantly Muslim populations. Most Muslims, even when they are devout, have no particular absolutist vision of their creed. That is to say, they have no particular desire to perpetrate atrocious (and self-defeating) acts of terrorist violence in Islam's name, no particular desire to live lives observant in the last detail of Shariah laws, no particular desire to live under the tyrannies of oppressive governments that impose the strictest of Islamic ideologies upon them, such as for instance in Saudi Arabia or Iran. And finally, though they may often justifiably conceive of the West, and especially America, as a *political and economic* threat to them (because of its sometimes naked pursuit of corporate interests, its support of Israeli occupation and expansion in Palestinian territory, its cynical support over decades of Islamic fundamentalist groups whenever that suited its geopolitical interests), unlike the absolutists, they do not particularly reject, as a *religious* threat coming from 'infidels,' the various ideas and freedoms entrenched in Western political practice.

The clash I have in mind, then, is between the values of these Muslims and those of the absolutists, whom they far outnumber. That brings me to the theme of my paper: It is right, I think, to describe this clash within Muslim popula-

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tions as a clash between secularists and absolutists. Let me explain why.

A few years ago, the journalist Christopher Hitchens gave an interesting lecture on secularism at Columbia University. Inevitably, the question of Islam came up. I raised a point during the discussion and in his response he made the extraordinary claim that the very category of a 'moderate Muslim' was incoherent, that it was doubtful that you can have religious convictions and not be given to fundamentalist tendencies and sympathies. I don't think he was especially picking on Islam. This was a reaction to religion in general, familiar from a robust British intellectual tradition stretching from Bertrand Russell to Richard Dawkins.¹ So, thinking he must have something more subtle and plausible in mind, I asked him a question that I thought could not possibly get an affirmative answer: "It seems to follow from what you have said that it is impossible to have genuinely secular societies until everyone, or at any rate most people, are irreligious – but you don't mean that, do you?" He said, "Yes, I do."

If he is right, then it is quite wrong to describe the 'clash' of values in the way I just did, as a conflict between the secularist and the absolutist. If he is right, then we are not likely to have genuinely secular societies virtually anywhere in the world for a very long time.

But he is wrong. The term 'secularism' today, whatever its origins and history of use, describes only a political doctrine, a doctrine about how citizens, even citizens who are devout people, agree to live and try and flourish in a polity that is not governed by religious principles and

practices. This of course means that they may have to give up strict adherence to some elements of their religion – those that aspire to a political relevance and that clash with familiar liberal laws. To be prepared to do so is the mark of what I was calling 'ordinary' or 'moderate' or 'non-absolutist' Muslims. Since everyone acknowledges that such Muslims considerably outnumber the absolutists, the prospect of secularism, soberly understood along these lines, is in principle far better than Hitchens's view suggests.

This is not to deny that a great deal of very difficult and important effort is needed to realize that prospect. But whatever the needed effort is, it does not amount to what Hitchens has in mind, viz., to bring about a society of unbelievers, attractive though that might be for atheists like Hitchens and me.

What needs to be done depends on how we diagnose the moral psychology of Islamic politics today in different parts of the world.

Hitchens is perhaps led to his conclusion of a somewhat heavy-handed ideal of an irreligious conception of the secular because of a certain powerlessness and even unwillingness on the part of 'ordinary' Muslims to confront the absolutists. Though I do not on this basis come to his conclusion (because to do so is premature and does not dig deep), I do have the anxiety and disappointment that many of us feel when we see most 'ordinary' Muslims sit silently by while the much smaller group of absolutists gets the limelight. The right response to this no doubt troubling phenomenon is not to give up on the very idea that a practicing Muslim can be secular; it is rather to try and diagnose why the ordinary Muslim is sitting silently by, why he or she is not more critical of the absolutist with whom he or she shares so little by way of ideology and ideal.

¹ This tradition has mostly targeted doctrinal religions such as Christianity and Islam rather than, say, Buddhism.

Before taking up that question, it is worth noting first the manifest relevance here of an elementary link between arithmetic and politics. If most Muslims everywhere (including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan) are not absolutists, it seems remarkable that these non-absolutist voices are not heard as the representative voices of Islam, wherever it exists. It is remarkable that the much smaller group of absolutists seems more central to the image and the voice that Islamic nations project.

Since an explicit rationale of democratic politics is that it calibrates representation with numbers, the failure of democratization in these societies is one obvious diagnosis for this remarkable discrepancy. We know that in elections in Iran and Pakistan the fundamentalist parties never get anything close to a majority. In Pakistan whenever there have been elections, they do not get even 10 percent of the vote. In fact, it is a perfectly safe generalization to say that fundamentalist Islamic parties meet with very little success in democratic elections everywhere in the world, unless they have been persecuted or suppressed, such as in Algeria.

The problem is slightly different in countries where Muslims are a minority, such as in India (or for that matter, Britain), and where there are functioning democracies. In these countries, the state (responding for political reasons to possibly disruptive pressures from an aggrieved and aggressive interest group) generally pays far greater attention to absolutist Muslim voices than to the vastly more numerous (but relatively muted) voices of moderates. In this circumstance, absolutists implicitly become the voice of the community, and exercise an influence quite disproportionate to their numbers.

Here, by the nature of the case, the arithmetic points to a slightly different political diagnosis. Since these are democratic nations with all the formal apparatus of a democratic state, what is evidently needed is not merely a democratic polity, but far greater democracy within the Muslim community, which will allow the absolutist voices to be shown up for what they are: a shrill but unrepresentative minority.

What forms such democratization should or could take within minority communities in democratic states like India and Britain is a complex question with no easy and obvious answer. It is a subject that is unduly neglected in political sociology and political theory.

Still, democratization itself will be hard to achieve – whether within Muslim minorities in democratic countries like India or in Muslim countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia – unless moderate Muslims are able to come out of their shells. To do so, they must become much more openly critical of the fundamentalists, with whom they share so little.

But criticism of fundamentalist Muslims by moderates has to date been relatively muted, largely, I think, because of a deep-seated moral psychology: As a result of a long colonial history, with its detailed subjugations and attitudes of condescension, and as a result of continuing feelings of helplessness in the face of what is perceived as American domination and Israeli occupation and expansion, even moderate Muslims feel that to criticize their own people in any way is letting the side down, somehow capitulating to a long-standing history of being colonized and made to feel inferior.

This suggests that there is yet another clash that is pertinent, a clash of attitudes and values, not this time between moderates and fundamentalists, but a

clash *internal to the psychology of moderates themselves*. Most moderate Muslims are torn between their dislike for fundamentalist visions of their religion and societies on the one hand, and, on the other, their deep defensive feelings of resentment against forces that they perceive to be alien and hostile in one colonial form or another for a very long time, forces that have often supported the fundamentalists when it suited their political agendas.

This second layer of internal clash within Islam is a vital factor in understanding the scope for a secular Islam. There can be no scope for secularism if this conflict in the hearts of moderate Muslims is not resolved in one direction rather than another – that is, if they do not find a way to overcome these defensive feelings of resentment. Without overcoming them, they will not be able to take the creative and assertive steps necessary to oppose the absolutists – and no amount of democratization of Muslim societies will help to subdue the fundamentalists unless the moderates are confident enough to launch that opposition.

There is no space here to elaborate in any detail what it would take to overcome such a defensive cast of mind. But it is a form of convenient and self-serving obtuseness on our part to think, as some do, that addressing the issues that give rise to this defensive resentment is irrelevant and unnecessary.² It is perhaps true that it will not affect the fundamentalists to address these issues – but even that is questionable, since

² It is quite common to hear people say things like: “Nothing will help with these Muslims; the issues are not about corporate presence and exploitation in Arab lands, not about Israeli intransigence and expansionism, not about American support for corrupt elites and

they (including Osama bin Laden) have openly declared that these issues are central to them.

But, in any case, it is not primarily the fundamentalist who needs to be addressed. It is the far more ubiquitous moderate who needs to be convinced that criticizing his own people and his own stultifying silence in the presence of shrill revivalist Islamic voices is not simply the handing over of ultimate victory to forces of long-standing external domination. The cruelty of wars, of bombings, of occupations, of expansionist settlements, of embargoes and sanctions, of support of corrupt elites, does nothing to convince them of this, does nothing to give them the necessary confidence – nor does the often transparently exploitative pursuit of Western corporate interests in these regions. They only encourage and increase the defensiveness.

It is extraordinary that humane and intelligent people do not see this quite obvious point. Even someone like Salman Rushdie, who has come around to saying that his brilliant, irreverent writings about Islam were intended not to

governments that have suppressed their people politically and economically in Iran under the Shah, in Saudi Arabia, in Egypt – these are all irrelevant issues. Muslims may say that these things are relevant, but that is all a veneer of false political rhetoric on top of the real underlying cause of the problem: their religious fanaticism. And even if they *think* that these things are relevant, even that is false; it is *false consciousness*. At bottom, all that is crucial is that Islam has bred fanaticism, and addressing all these issues will not help at all with that.” It’s not hard to see that it is a short step from this view of things to conclude that nothing will help but ‘shock and awe.’ This attitude is more than just self-serving or obtuse; it is a form of impertinence, as all such charges of false consciousness are, because it makes claims to having more insight into people’s motivations than the people themselves have.

merely ridicule the fundamentalist conception of Islam but also to give encouragement to the moderate Muslim opposition to the fundamentalist, goes on to support two wars that have done everything possible to undermine any motivation that a moderate might have in forging that opposition.

But all this is to take up matters that are current and controversial, and I did not want this essay to be primarily polemical. The diagnostic points I am making are much more general. To put them in summary, I have been arguing: 1) that there is an implicit clash within Islamic societies between moderate and fundamentalist Muslims, and sheer arithmetic suggests that democratization (including intracommunity democratization) in Muslim societies will help end this clash in a secular direction; and 2) that resolving a second, quite different sort of clash by paying humane attention to the very specific sort of internal moral and psychological conflict that the moderate Muslim faces may be a necessary and prior condition for resolving the clash between secularists and fundamentalists.

Why is it that political positions such as Huntington's and Hitchens's are blind to these more subtle clashes, which should be the basis of any effort to defuse the more portentous clash that they predict?

I suspect it is because of a line of thought that goes something like this: Populations that identify themselves with Islam could not possibly resolve these clashes along these lines, because to do so would be to give up on that identification with Islam, to give up on Muslim identity.

As I said at the outset, if these conflicts were resolved in the ways I think possible, then moderate but nevertheless reli-

gious Muslims would have to oppose the fundamentalists and therefore relinquish some aspects of their religion. They would have to relinquish certain ideas about relations to non-Muslims, ideas about gender relations in institutions such as marriage, divorce, alimony, etc., and commitments to censorship and punishment of blasphemy. But to do so, it will be said, would be to give up on one's Muslim identity, to cease to see oneself as a Muslim.

This line of thought is based on a numbingly false picture of cultural identity that fundamentalists would like to encourage. But a person's identity is not given by a checklist, such that if every item is not checked off one loses one's identity. Identity is simply not a codified phenomenon in that way. It is fluid and malleable and survives enormous amounts of revision and erosion, as we all know even from Muslim societies in many parts of the world today. The idea that if one gives up a Shariah law about blasphemy or alimony, or even a customary religious practice such as *pardah*, that one is ceasing to be a Muslim altogether is an egregious misrepresentation of what it takes to be a Muslim. I know any number of Muslims, not *déracinés* like me but religious people, whom it would be a travesty to count as anything but Muslims, and who have altogether shed these offending convictions and practices. To say that they don't count as having Muslim identity is to assume a conception that only an absolutist would affirm. Huntington and Hitchens, therefore, should worry a bit that their views here are too perfectly of a piece with the absolutist's.

Since there is scope for misunderstanding here, it is important to state that the point I have just made about identity not being codifiable should not be confused with the quite different and

much more glib idea of what is sometimes called 'hybridity' or 'multiple identities.' There is a tendency, mostly in contemporary literary theory, to say that in a world of postcoloniality and large-scale immigration, there are no identities, only cultural flux that dissolves notions such as 'self' and identification with religion and other forms of cultural belonging.

Of course, the idea that we all have multiple identities is a banality. Who can deny it? But it's not an idea that could possibly overturn the plain fact that in many historical and social contexts, for quite specifiable functional reasons, some of these multiple identities loom much larger for us than others, and abide for much longer than others. What makes the picture of constant flux and hybridity (or, to use Salman Rushdie's wonderful word 'chutneyfication') so implausible is that it cannot accommodate this plain fact, and actually finds it theoretically misguided to try to do so.

The notion I am invoking is not hybridity at all, but a lack of codification in one's understanding of identity, which can allow for revision of commitments and values without the necessary loss of identity. The only thing that such an idea shares with hybridity is the negative goal of repudiating the essentialism of primordial and immutable conceptions of identity. But to achieve this goal, it posits not some postmodern conception of an incoherent psyche produced by immigrant or postcolonial experience, but rather a quite different neo-Hegelian idea – of a psyche informed by an internal conflict of values. These conflicts, which are engendered by historical or even sometimes by personal encounters, do not altogether dissolve notions of self and identity. Rather, they become the occasion for a community's (or individual's) internal deliberation and negotia-

tion, which will sometimes, though by no means always, produce a new identity. Identities, conceived and shaped in these 'dialectical' rather than 'hybrid' terms, are hard won; they reflect the constitutive relationship that history and experience have to the self and its moral psychology.³

But to return from these more theoretical reflections to the central point of this paper, which they are intended to make possible: There is much scope for Muslims retaining their identity as Muslims, even as they de facto shed this or that aspect of their faith. It has already happened in many parts of the world. That is to say, there is much scope for them to acquire an increasing and cumulative secularism even within their commitment to Islam. But they will find it very hard to do so if we do not cease to gear *our* rhetoric and political agendas to the ideal of a 'clash of civilizations,' and focus instead on these clashes within Islamic civilization itself.

³ For more on these themes, see my essays "What is a Muslim? Fundamental Commitment and Cultural Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (4) (Summer 1992); "Identity and Identification" in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (New York: Elsevier, 2003); "Secularism and the Moral Psychology of Identity" in Rajeev Bhargava, Amiya Kumar Bagchi, and R. Sudarshan, eds., *Multiculturalism, Liberalism, and Democracy* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).