

"The World in the Post-1990s"

Part One

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In one of his famous lectures, *De Descriptione Temporum*, "On the Description of Our Times," C. S. Lewis set forth this thesis that I paraphrase from memory: *it is absolutely necessary for us to understand the true nature of the times in which we live*. It was over fifty years ago when he gave this lecture on the occasion of assuming a new position at Cambridge University. After his conversion to the historic Christian faith, he became deeply concerned about the de-Christianisation of our culture. He called it a post-Christian culture. As a lecturer at Cambridge, he did not leave his faith outside the lecture hall. This conviction shaped his entire career and made him one of the most influential Christian lay theologians and apologists in the 20th century.

I have been tremendously helped by the thesis of C. S. Lewis concerning the necessity of assessing the basic nature of the cultural milieu that surrounds us. His thesis echoed our Lord's admonition (Matthew 16:1-3) to his contemporaries about the necessity of discerning the "*the semeia ton kairon*" i.e., the "*signs of the times*." The Pharisees knew how to forecast the weather in the eastern Mediterranean world, but showed an abysmal ignorance of the critical nature of the hour in Palestine during the first century. By fostering the hope of a coming political Messiah who would throw off the yoke of Rome, they immunized their people against receiving the true Messiah who came to save them from their sins. Eventually, the outcome was horrible. In AD 70, Jerusalem was destroyed, and in AD 135, it ceased to exist after the second Jewish revolt. Another scattering of the Jewish people ensued that lasted for centuries.

What about our times? Have we learned the lessons of history? A British authority on the Soviet Union, Robert Conquest wrote in his new book, **Reflections on a Ravaged Century**,

The huge catastrophes of our era have been inflicted by human beings driven by certain thoughts. And so history's essential questions must be: How do we account for what has been called the "ideological frenzy" of the twentieth century? How did these mental aberrations gain a purchase? What was the sort and condition of people affected? We need to develop the history and the nature of the various destructive ideologies in action. We need to consider the history and traditions of the culture that stood in opposition to them. But before we turn to these broader themes, we need to examine the history and background of the mental arena in which the battle of ideas was fought.

Both scarcely formulated fanaticisms and closed systems of ideas are, of course, to be found throughout the past. These historical phenomena are full of lessons for our time (indeed ignorance of history is one of the most negative attributes of modern man). The basic characteristic and attraction was and is the archaic idea that utopia can be constructed on earth; the offer of a millenarian solution to all human problems.

What about us, now living at the beginning of the Third Millennium? Have we learned the lessons of history? Do we discern the "*signs of the times*"? Yes, the cold war is over. The Soviet Union is a thing of the past. Germany is united. Even Mainland China has discarded Marxist economics and is knocking at the door of the World Trade Organization. Some Western intellectuals have advanced the thesis that "*history has come to an end.*" What they mean is that the world that most of us knew and experienced during the major part of the 20th century is gone. The West and its values have triumphed on a global scale.

In his book, **The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order**, Professor Huntington, another accomplished expert on world affairs, opposes this "end of history" theory. He wrote:

Modernization, in short, does not necessarily mean Westernization. Non-Western societies can modernize and have modernized without abandoning their own cultures and adopting wholesale Western values, institutions, and practices. The latter, indeed, may be almost impossible: whatever obstacles non-Western cultures pose to modernization pale before those they pose to Westernization. It would, as Braudel observes, almost "be childish" to think that modernization or the "triumph of civilization in the singular" would lead to the end of plurality of historic cultures embodied for centuries in the world's great civilizations. Modernization, instead, strengthens those cultures and reduces the relative power of the West. In fundamental ways, the world is becoming more modern and less Western.

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If the above thesis of Samuel Huntington is correct, and I do believe that it is so as attested by the events of the nineties of the last century, then what is our responsibility as Christians living in the West, enjoying its privileges, and witnessing its slow slide into dissolution? Our duty is to resist the steady secularization of our culture, and to allow our two thousand year old tradition to guide our thinking and our plans on a truly Biblical course.

It follows that we reject the superficiality and the triumphalism of the thesis that the West, with its values and traditions, has become the universal civilization. On the contrary, since the end of the cold war, we have observed the re-birth of old civilizations that affirm their own values and traditions. The world has not become one world, but it is still composed of many worlds, each informed by its own culture, which in its turn, is based on a specific religious tradition.

Professor Huntington describes **The World of Civilizations: Post-1990** as being composed of nine distinct civilizations. *They are the Western, Latin American, African, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist, and Japanese.* Our concern is primarily with the Islamic culture and the results of its reawakening and demands. This emphasis on Islam is necessary when we make an analysis of the world events and trouble spots since the beginning of the last decade of the 20th century.

The great singular most dramatic event that may still be fresh in our memory is the Gulf War. We may have forgotten its details. Americans demonstrated their

overwhelming military power and advanced technology in transporting 500,000 men and women with their equipment halfway across the world. The war was won with minimum casualties. But it had a profound impact on the thinking of the Muslim peoples of the world. Radical Muslims depicted the war as a Western invasion of the sacred land of Arabia, and not as a liberation of a small Islamic state, Kuwait.

Since the end of the Gulf War, most all of the conflicts occurred within Islamic areas. The disintegration of Yugoslavia and the Serb's attempt to overwhelm Bosnia brought the West into the area to aid its Muslim population. Then, a new geographic entity came to our attention, Kosovo and the decision of the NATO countries to oust the Serbs by military force from that province. The war against Serbia by the NATO forces led to the destruction of most of the infrastructure of the country. This Kosovo "police action" had an important Islamic component. Nowadays, we watch on our television screens the savage war in Chechnya, which pits the Russian forces against the Muslim Chechnians. Think of East Timor and its almost complete destruction by the Muslim militias with the support of the Indonesian army. And in the early days of 2000, we have witnessed the horrible events in Nigeria where some northern states, dominated by Muslim majorities, declared their intention to implement Shari'ah Law on all the population, whether Muslim, Christian or animist. The city of Kaduna looked like a war zone in the report of BBC Television.

It is not my intention to dwell on all the conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims.

It is neither prejudice nor a willingness to ignite old conflicts between Islam and the Rest, but simply a realism that requires us to consider that the major challenge of the new century is how to co-exist with the growing radicalization of Islamic societies in a globalized world. The age of conquests and re-conquests belongs to the past. The worlds of Samuel Huntington, much as they want to live according to their own cultural traditions, still remain very interdependent. New problems of giant proportions have arisen: desertification, the lack of adequate water resources for the soaring populations of most Islamic countries, the growing pollution problem that besets the developing countries, all of these facts require the attention of the whole world. There may be nine distinct worlds, rightly classified, as such, on a cultural basis, but there is only one **oecumene**, one inhabited earth, one world, in which we all live, and one atmosphere that we all share!

What should our position be vis-à-vis the challenges of the New Millennium, and especially, our relationship with the Islamic World? Since the nineties, the West has been unable to formulate a rational and consistent policy to guide our international relations with the more than forty Islamic countries of the world. This can be seen in our rushing to help Muslim minorities in Europe, but failing to lift a finger to help the African Christians in Sudan who have lost more than a million of their people in a struggle with the Muslim government. We talk about human rights, but are selective in our going to the help of victims of oppression should they happen to be Christian. Is it because African Christians are of less human value than the Muslims of Bosnia or Chechnya? Are we motivated solely by an ill-defined national interest, which may be nothing more than a materialistic concern for our economic prosperity?

In the next article, we will cover other chapters of Prof. Huntington's book, dwelling on some specific points that explain the past, present, and future relationships of the West with Islam.