

This article appeared in the August-September 1997 issue of MISSIONARY MONTHLY, published in Grand Rapids, Michigan 49512-5365

THE CLASH OF WORLD CULTURES

by Bassam M. and Shirley W. Madany

You would not expect a political scientist from Harvard to be the author of what ought to be "must" reading for missionaries and candidates to missions school. Samuel P. Huntington, a Professor at Harvard University, and Director of security planning during the Carter administration, as well as founder and co-editor of Foreign Policy magazine, has written a prophetic book entitled: THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS AND THE REMAKING OF WORLD ORDER, Simon & Schuster, 367 pp. The book has sparked glowing reviews and comments and upon delving into its contents one finds they are not exaggerated.

A. J. Bacevich, reviewing the book in the May '97 issue of FIRST THINGS, commented that his "style is precise, pithy, plainspoken and coolly analytical. He eschews jargon. Crisp, declarative sentences array themselves in tightly organized paragraphs." Here is a sample: "The argument now that the spread of pop culture and consumer goods around the world represents the triumph of Western civilization trivializes Western culture. The essence of Western civilization is the Magna Carta not the Magna Mac. The fact that non-Westerners may bite into the latter has no implications for them accepting the former."

Huntington sees religion as the single most important factor in world cultures and he has redrawn the geographical map along these lines. He points out eight distinctive civilizations: Islamic, Sinic (centered on the 'core state' of China), Western (with the United States at its core), Orthodox (with Russia as its core), Japanese, Hindu, Latin American and possibly African. He considers Islam, the West and China to constitute the most important of these classifications and that most future clashes will be between these three major groupings.

This very new book is thought-provoking in the extreme as this skillful author prepares our minds for the Third Millennium. Colonialism has all but disappeared with momentous return of Hong Kong to China on July 1, 1997. A totally new situation is developing.

He emphasizes the part which Islam is already playing in the de-stabilizing of the world order. In the long march of world history, he considers the clash between communism and the West to be only a "fleeting and superficial historical phenomenon, compared to the continuing and deeply conflictual relation between Islam and Christianity."

The would-be missionary needs to be aware that the people of Islam "are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power." Because of this, Islam finds it difficult to live in harmony with its neighbors. He

would have you trace the borders of Islam and see the conflict: Bosnia, Chechnya, etc. He talks about "fault line wars" and lists "Arabs and Israelis, Indians and Pakistanis, Sudanese Muslims and Christians, and Lebanese Shi'ites and Maronites.

Even though religion has been relegated to a back seat in the United States, still this political scientist assigns it a front-row place on the global scene. He considers that religious affiliations signify "who we are" and "who we are not."

The serious young Christian feeling the call to share his/her faith with Muslims any where in this world certainly would be well served to get some prior preparation. The prevalent style of travel where you leave everything to a tour guide, eliminates a need for study and maps. One detects a tendency for American Christians to rush off to a foreign country with very little awareness of its history, culture, or mores.

When we take the insights and forecasts of Prof. Huntington into account we may point to certain implications for missionaries and their journeying in the 21st century.

1. It is obvious that Western missionaries going into the rest of the world would be operating under different conditions than those which prevailed from William Carey's days (1792) to the end of World War II. While that period was marked by the existence of several European empires dominating huge parts of Asia and Africa, we now live in the post-colonial days where all nations, no matter what their size, assert their own sovereignty and are proud of their particular culture.

2. During the past 200 years Western missionaries came from various communions and manifested a consensus about the fundamentals of Christianity. They asserted the uniqueness, finality and superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ and the necessity of faith in Him as condition of salvation. Nowadays that consensus has disappeared. Unfortunately some very influential theologians and missiologists are either universalists or pluralists (the latter advocate the equal validity of all religions). It is therefore very important that the true missionaries of the Cross must distance themselves from all these false forms of Christianity as well as from the wider Western culture which is getting more and more secularized. To quote again from this book:

"American culture bears more than passing resemblance to the decadent and corrupt Great Satan that is the favorite target of fundamentalist mullahs. Crime, violence, drug abuse, illegitimacy, failing schools, the erosion of the family, a weakened work ethic, and 'a cult of personal indulgence' all point to a moral decline that approaches cultural suicide."

Thus, these Christian missionaries must reaffirm their faithfulness to the Bible as the authoritative source of faith and to the historic Christian traditions which have been summarized for us in the early ecumenical creeds and in the confessional documents of the Reformation. They should wholeheartedly proclaim the Biblical world view which portrays Christianity as the faith for all mankind.

In conclusion, The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order comes at a critical time in the history of the West and should cause all Christians to reflect

seriously about their faith and the obligation to share it with the six billion people of the world.

While Prof. Huntington does not claim a personal adherence to the Christian faith, and might not have dreamt that it would be recommended for missionary reading, nevertheless his diagnosis of the global situation is both realistic and useful. The decade of the 90's afforded him, by its fast moving events, the opportunity not only to set forth his thesis but to buttress it with concrete examples from contemporaneous history.

It remains for us Christians to proclaim the Gospel as the only divinely revealed cure to the ills of individuals and civilizations. Christianity is not synonymous with the West. It has been around for 2000 years and has impacted all kinds of civilizations on all continents. Being based on the Gospel of God, it is not bound to one culture, but transcends all cultures. If Western civilization is rapidly distancing itself from its Christian roots, it does not follow that Christianity has failed. Other peoples in different cultures are welcoming its liberating message. The forecasts of Samuel Huntington may well come true, and the next century may witness some terrible clashes between the followers of different cultures. But we must maintain our Christian hope and, by our missionary work, hasten the coming of the Day when we shall join the heavenly choir and sing: Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. (Rev. 19:6b)

[Return](#) to Bibliography / Book List

Return to Middle East Resources [home page](#)