

“The World in the Post-Nineties”

A Review Article by Rev. Bassam Madany

In one of his famous lectures, *De Descriptione Temporum*, “*On the Description of Our Times*,” C. S. Lewis set forth a thesis that 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 delivered this lecture on the occasion of his assuming a new position at Cambridge University. After his conversion to the historic Christian faith, he had become deeply concerned about the de-Christianisation of our Western culture. He called it Post-Christian. 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 of the twentieth century.

I have been tremendously helped by this thesis of C. S. Lewis about the necessity of assessing the true 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*.” (KJV) The Pharisees knew how to forecast the weather in the eastern Mediterranean, 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, 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, the Temple was destroyed, and in AD 135, the Romans finished their destructive work on Jerusalem. For centuries it ceased to exist, in the aftermath of the second Jewish revolt. Another scattering of the Jewish people ensued that would last for centuries.

What about our times? Do we take seriously the lessons of history? A British authority on the Soviet Union, Robert Conquest, reminds us about the necessity for a realistic diagnosis of the history of the past century, with the hope that we might learn some important lessons. In his new book, **Reflections on a Ravaged Century**, he makes these observations:

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.

Chapter 1, Sections 1&2

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?*” 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 twentieth century is gone. The West and its values have triumphed on a global scale.

Professor Huntington’s thesis is opposed to that advanced by the “*end of history*” theorists. In his book, **The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order**, 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.

Universal Civilization? Modernization and Westernization. Chapter 3, p. 78

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, what is our responsibility as Christians living in the West, enjoying its privileges, and witnessing, at the same time, its slow slide into anarchy and nihilism? We must resist the steady secularization of our culture, and allow our two thousand year old tradition to guide our thinking and our plans on a truly Biblical course. It follows then 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:**

Of the Post-Nineties as composed of nine distinct civilizations. *They are the Western, Latin American, African, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist, and Japanese.* In this review article, we limit our concern to the Islamic world, and the rise of radicalism now referred to as Islamism. 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 twentieth-century.

The great singular and most dramatic event that may still be fresh in our memory is the Gulf War. America demonstrated its 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. Of course, like the Korean War, it was not decisive. It left Saddam Husein in power, and subjected his people to untold suffering due to the sanctions that were imposed on their land. Furthermore, the Gulf War had a profound impact on the thinking of the Muslim peoples of the world. Radical leaders depicted the war as a Western invasion of the sacred land of Arabia, and not as a liberation of Kuwait, a small Islamic state.

Since the end of the Gulf War, almost all of the conflicts occurred within Islamic parts of the world. Think of the festering border war that pits Pakistan against India over Kashmir. From the Indian subcontinent, move on to Europe. The disintegration of Yugoslavia after the death of Tito was followed by the Serb's attempt to overwhelm Bosnia. This brought the West into the area in defense of its Muslim population. Then, a new geographic entity was thrust on our attention, Kosovo, and the decision of NATO to oust the Serbs by military force from that province. The war against Serbia by the NATO led forces led to the destruction of most of the infrastructure of the country. This "police action" had an important Islamic component. The majority of the people who lived in this Serbian province were Albanians, most of them belonging to the Muslim faith. Nowadays, we watch on our television screens the savage war in going on in Chechnya, which pits the Russian forces against the Muslim Chechnians.

It is not my intention to dwell on all the conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims. Think of East Timor and its almost complete destruction by the Muslim militias with the support of the Indonesian army. And since the early days of 2000, we witness the horrible events in Nigeria where certain northern states, dominated by Muslim majorities, declared their intention to implement **Shari'a 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 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 coexist with the growing radicalization of Islamic societies in a globalized world. The age of conquests and re-conquests belong to the past. The distinct worlds and cultures of Samuel Huntington, much as they seek to live according to their own traditions, are still quite interdependent. New problems of great proportions have arisen such as: desertification, the lack of adequate water supplies for the soaring populations of most Islamic countries, the growing and unchecked pollution of the environment, require the attention and the help of the whole world. There may be nine distinct worlds, rightly classified as such, on a cultural basis, but there remains 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, as Christians, vis-à-vis the challenges of the New Millennium, and especially, our relationship with the Islamic World? The West has been unable to formulate a rational and consistent policy to guide our international relations with the one billion Muslims of the world, living in more than forty Islamic countries. This can be witnessed 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 of the North. 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? It is indeed a sad commentary on the condition of Western civilization when it claims to be the universal defendant of the rights of the weak and oppressed, and yet is rather selective in the application of that ideal. Samuel Huntington's **Clash of Civilizations** serves as a unique and necessary contribution to the reflection of Christians as they seek to live responsibly at the dawn of the Third Millennium on the global scene. To discard any utopian dream to bring about a perfect world order this side of the Parousia does not imply that we should remain passive as we live in a world filled with conflicts. Whenever there is a need to speak out against oppression, we should not hesitate to fulfill our responsibility as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, our Sovereign King.

The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order, by Samuel P. Huntington. A Touchstone Book, published by Simon and Schuster, New York, NY 10220, 1997 Paperback U.S. \$14.00

Reflections on a Ravaged Century, by Robert Conquest. An Excerpt, Part 1 of 2 and Part 2 of 2

http://www.wwnorton.com/catalog/fall99/conquest_1.htm

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