

# The Clash of Civilizations Thesis: A Critical Appraisal

Written by Deepshikha Shahi

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## The Clash of Civilizations Thesis: A Critical Appraisal

<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/04/02/the-clash-of-civilizations-thesis-a-critical-appraisal/>

DEEPSHIKHA SHAHI, APR 2 2017

**This is an excerpt from *Understanding Post-9/11 Afghanistan: A Critical Insight into Huntington's Civilizational Approach*. An E-IR Open Access Book by Deepshikha Shahi.**

**Available now on Amazon (UK, USA, Ca, Ger, Fra), in all good book stores, and via a free PDF download. Find out more about E-IR's range of open access books here.**

The tension between theory and the 'real world' can produce a tendency to see the development of theory as a response to events in the world, with seemingly new phenomena requiring fresh theories – the most recent phenomena involving the end of the Cold War, the demise of bipolarity, and questions about the status of American hegemony. The academic discipline of International Relations (IR) awaited a new paradigm which could provide an outlook to delineate the picture of the newly emerging world politics after the end of the Cold War. Interestingly, various contending paradigms cropped up, most of these originating in the West – particularly in the US. The linkage is in fact significant as it demonstrates the knowledge-power relationship in international relations. If the US could disguise its empire building project and legitimise its aggressive foreign policy behaviour as a necessary defensive posture to contain the threat of communism and the USSR during the Cold War, it could not continue to do so after the collapse of USSR and the end of the Cold War. It was, therefore, in greater need than ever before of the legitimising discourses that many North American and European intellectuals of the right and liberal centre seemed eager to provide.[1] Of these legitimising discourses the one that earned the most attention was that of Samuel P. Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis. In fact, the proponents and critics of his thesis have virtually created a 'clash of scholarship' in IR. This chapter aims at demonstrating the various dimensions of this clash of scholarship whilst adding a new dimension to it. It consists of three sections. The first section attempts to lay out the origin and character of Huntington's thesis. The second section tries to categorise the various criticisms of it. Finally, the third section sets out to offer a psychological critique of the clash of civilizations thesis, thereby suggesting a nexus between 'knowledge' and 'violence'.

### Sketching the Origin and Character

Huntington called for a paradigmatic shift to comprehend post-Cold War global politics as he held that the 'inter-civilizational' issues were replacing inter-superpower ones.[2] Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis endeavoured to offer a new paradigm of world politics, which in contrast to state-centric realist theory and the system dominated neo-realist model, focused on civilizational-cultural religious factors.[3] In his article, *The Clash of Civilizations?*, published in *Foreign Affairs* in Summer 1993 (later expanded in his 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*), he laid down his basic propositions:

It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation States will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be battle lines of the future.[4]

Huntington claimed that the fault lines between civilizations stemmed from differences in social and political values.

# The Clash of Civilizations Thesis: A Critical Appraisal

Written by Deepshikha Shahi

The civilizations had different values on the relations between God and man, the individual and group, the citizen and state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy.[5] Most of the arguments in the pages that followed relied on a vague notion of something Huntington called 'civilization identity' and the interaction among seven or eight major 'civilizations' of which the conflict between two of them, 'Islam' and 'the West', got the lion's share of his attention.

The article's most controversial statement came when Huntington demonised Islam by suggesting a linkage between Islam and violence. He wrote,

In Eurasia the great historic fault lines between civilizations are once more aflame. This is particularly true along the boundaries of the crescent shaped Islamic block of nations from the bulge of Africa to Central Asia. Violence also occurs between Muslims on the one hand, and orthodox Serbs in the Balkans, Jews in Israel, Hindus in India, Buddhists in Burma and Catholics in the Philippines. Islam has bloody borders.[6]

Huntington enumerated six causes of intra-Islamic and extra-Islamic violence. *Militarism, indigestibility, or less adaptability, and proximity to non-Muslim groups*, explained the Muslim conflict propensity throughout history while *anti-Muslim prejudice, absence of core state in Islam and demographic explosion in Muslim societies* were held responsible for Muslim violence in the late twentieth century.[7]

The most remarkable portion of Huntington's thesis dealt with policy recommendations. With regard to US domestic policy Huntington emphasised upon the need for tightening immigration and assimilating immigrants and minorities so as to increase civilizational coherence. He favoured Americanisation and denounced multiculturalism, as it weakened the American creed. Huntington's guidelines on US foreign policy pressed the importance of maintaining Western technological and military superiority over other civilizations, non-interference in the affairs of other civilizations, empowering Atlantic partnership between US and Europe, limiting the expansion of Islamic-Confucian states, and exploiting the difference between these two civilizations.[8] The provocative thoughts underlying Huntington's thesis drew massive criticism.

## Categorising the Critique

The criticisms of the clash of civilizations thesis can be categorised under three headings – epistemological, methodological and ethical. The epistemological critique condemns the clash of civilizations thesis on grounds of its realist, orientalist and elitist outlook. The methodological critique attacks its monolithic, inconsistent and reductionist/essentialist attitude while the ethical critique denounces it for being a purposeful thesis that fuels enemy discourse and, in the process, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

### *Epistemological Critique*

The epistemological critique problematises the very source of Huntington's thesis in three ways. Firstly, it claims that the clash of civilizations thesis does not come up with a new paradigm since it neatly fits into political realism.[9] Huntington's emphasis on the ever-present probability of war between civilizations represents a fear that is deeply rooted in political realism. The Machiavellian advice of Huntington to exploit the difference between Islamic and Confucian civilizations can only be considered within the realist realm.[10] According to Muhammad Asadi, the clash of civilizations thesis is dismantled historically as soon as we realise that it is nothing new. It is the same Cold War methodology rebranded for maximum impact, a contrived clash that the US was pursuing for several decades by converting an old ally into foe post-World War Two. This repackaging for a new era was necessary because the old enemy, the Soviet Union, no longer existed. Hans Kung contends that Huntington follows a bloc based Cold War mentality where war is considered crucial for maintaining the West's technological and military superiority.[11] In a similar vein, G. John Ikenberry, Rubenstein and Crocker assert that Huntington proclaims the slogan *-long live the Cold War*.[12]

Secondly, the epistemological critique argues that the clash of civilizations thesis is *orientalist*. It claims that the

# The Clash of Civilizations Thesis: A Critical Appraisal

Written by Deepshikha Shahi

language of 'us' and 'them' is embedded in Huntington's thesis. Edward W. Said claims that the 'epistemology of othering' underlying Huntington's thesis is problematic as labels, generalisations and cultural assertions are finally inadequate. He further argues that it is simpler to make bellicose statements for the purpose of mobilising collective passions than to reflect, examine, and sort out what it is we are dealing with in reality, the interconnectedness of innumerable lives, 'ours' as well as 'theirs'.<sup>[13]</sup> This oriental scholarship perceives Islam as a threat to the West.<sup>[14]</sup> The act of perceiving the 'other' as a 'threat' rather than a 'challenge' leads to a siege mentality generated by Western hubris.<sup>[15]</sup> Manochehr Dorraj raises objections over the reification, distortion and dehumanisation of the Muslims produced by the clash of civilizations thesis.<sup>[16]</sup> Said opines that the 'fictional gimmick' constructed by such an orientalist approach is better for reinforcing defensive self-pride than for any critical understanding of the bewildering interdependence of our time.

Thirdly, the epistemological critique finds fault with the elitist orientation of the clash of civilizations thesis. It argues that Huntington's thesis is an 'official mythology' generated by US elites to 'scare the hell out of the American people', as ex-US Senator Vanderbilt put it. Therefore, the agenda of US elites differs from that of the American masses. Interestingly, the clash of civilizations rhetoric is not limited to American and European elites – many al-Qaida militants also view the current US-led conflicts in the Middle East as a proof of clash between Islam and the West.<sup>[17]</sup> Oliver Roy admits that Huntington is regularly accused of having introduced the concept of the clash of civilizations, but this approach is also shared by fundamentalists and conservative Muslims.<sup>[18]</sup> Gilles Kepel points out that Ayman al-Zawahiri's text *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner* presents a worldview comparable, but in reverse, to Huntington's thesis. Zawahiri's book is a jihadist reading of the clash of civilizations.<sup>[19]</sup> These observations compelled Michael Dunn to conclude that the clash of civilizations is an essential form of discourse for two powerful groups of elites – the Western policymakers and the leaders of the al-Qaida network. Benjamin Barber further highlights the gap between the agenda of elites and masses in the Islamic world by stating that hyperbolic commentators like Huntington have described the current divide in the world as a clash of civilizations, but this is to ape the messianic rhetoric of Osama bin Laden, who called for precisely such a war. The difference between bin Laden's terrorists and the poverty-stricken constituents he tries to call to arms, however, is the difference between radical Jihadist elites and ordinary men and women concerned with feeding their children and nurturing their religious communities.<sup>[20]</sup> Thus, the real clash is not between the civilizations but between the elites and the masses over the definition of reality. Said calls it the 'clash of ignorance'.

## *Methodological Critique*

The methodological critique condemns Huntington's thesis on three grounds. Firstly, it objects to the monolithic conception of civilizations which neglects the polycentric structure of both worlds.<sup>[21]</sup> Fred Halliday argues that Huntington ignores the internal dynamics, plurality and myriad complexities of Islam and the Muslim world.<sup>[22]</sup> Aijaz Ahmad asserts that there is no single Islamic culture, but multiple centres of Islam and various types of political Islam and Islamism in the Muslim world.<sup>[23]</sup> Ibrahim Kalin calls for deconstructing the monolithic perceptions of Islam and the West.<sup>[24]</sup> The existence of numerous conflicts within civilizations and cooperation between civilizations refutes the monolithic orientation of Huntington's thesis. For instance, M.E. Ahrari asks Huntington as to how Iraqi and Turkish treatment of Kurds can demonstrate civilizational unity and coherence?<sup>[25]</sup> Shireen T. Hunter cites the case of Turkey's strategic relations with Israel in the 1990s, when its relations with the Arab world and Iran were generally problematic.<sup>[26]</sup>

Secondly, the methodological critique pinpoints the inconsistencies in Huntington's thesis. It disagrees with the selective perception and overgeneralization involved in Huntington's reading of history. For instance, Fouad Ajami contends that the Gulf War is a case for 'clash of state interest' rather than 'clash of civilizations'.<sup>[27]</sup> Similarly Hunter criticises Huntington's portrayal of the Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict as a civilizational clash since Muslim Iran had more friendly relations with Christian Armenians, than with Muslim Azerbaijan. Robert Marks is dissatisfied with the fact that Huntington mostly uses secondary sources in his book and shows a weak scholarship of Islam, China, and Japan.<sup>[28]</sup> Seizaburo Sato raises objections over the illogicality of Huntington's thesis since he makes Russia the core state of Slavic Orthodox civilization yet advises that Russia should be brought into the EU. Sato further raises the question as to why Huntington suggests setting Japan against potential Islamic Confucian alignment, when he defines Japan as an economic threat to the West?<sup>[29]</sup> The critics find Huntington's thesis confusing as he uses the

# The Clash of Civilizations Thesis: A Critical Appraisal

Written by Deepshikha Shahi

term 'religion', 'culture', and 'civilization' interchangeably.

Thirdly, the methodological critique attacks the reductionist / essentialist tone of the thesis in two senses: First, it reduces the multiple causes of inter-and intra-national conflict, thereby essentialising the civilizational factor as the prime reason. Second, it reduces the multiple dimensions of individual identity, thereby essentialising the civilizational factor as the chief aspect.

The scholars who refute the essentialisation of a civilizational cause of conflict include Noam Chomsky, Fouad Ajami, Shireen T. Hunter and James Kurth. Chomsky accepts that there is clash between 'the West' and 'the rest'. However, he opines that the West is in clash with those who are adopting the preferential option for the poor no matter who they are. They can be Catholics (in Latin America) or Communists (in Afghanistan). Chomsky refers to Charles Tilly to assert that over the last millennium,

Western states have been ruthlessly at war because of a central tragic fact that coercion works. Those who apply substantial force to their fellows get compliance, and from that compliance draw multiple advantages of money, goods, deference, and access to pleasures denied to less powerful people.[30]

Fouad Ajami complains that Huntington overestimates the cultural differences between civilizations and underestimates the influence of the West in hostile relations with the Muslim world. Shireen T. Hunter and Muhammad Asadi point out that the conflictive relations between the West and the Muslim world hardly stems from civilizational differences but from structural-political and economic inequalities between the two worlds of 'haves' and 'have nots'. [31] James Kurth presents a more complicated picture that the real clash is not between the West and the rest, as Huntington assumes, but between pro-Western conservatives and post-Western liberal multiculturalists in the West itself. [32]

The scholars who denounce the essentialisation of the civilizational aspect of individual identity include Amartya Sen and Achin Vanaik. Sen refuses it as it ignores the multiple dimensions of identity that overlap across the so-called civilizational boundaries, while Achin Vanaik rejects it as it overlooks the dynamic and historically contingent nature of the inter-relationship between civilization, culture, and identity. Sen, in his book *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, expresses the view that the difficulty with Huntington's approach begins with his system of unique categorization. He claims that the thesis of a civilizational clash is conceptually parasitic on the commanding power of a unique categorisation along so-called civilizational lines, which closely follows religious divisions, to which singular attention is paid. Sen warns that the increasing failure to acknowledge the many identities that any person has and to try to firmly place the individual into rigid boxes, essentially shaped by a pre-eminent religious identity, is an intellectual confusion that can cause dangerous divisiveness. An Islamist instigator of violence against infidels may want Muslims to forget that they have identities other than being Islamic. What is surprising for Sen is that those who would like to quell that violence promote, in effect, the same intellectual disorientation by seeing Muslims primarily as members of an Islamic world. According to Sen, the people of the world can be classified on the basis of many other partitions: nationalities, locations, classes, occupations, social status, languages, politics, and so on. Sen believes that the world is made much more incendiary by the single-dimensional categorisation of human beings, which combines haziness of vision with an increased scope for the exploitation of that haze by the champions of violence.

Achin Vanaik, in his book *The Furies of Indian Communalism*, provides a sophisticated understanding of the concept of 'civilization', 'culture', and 'identity' as against the over-simplistic notions entertained by Huntington. He accounts for two types of civilizational studies. The first is a transhistorical and culturally essentialist reading of the enduring impact of some initial civilizational entity or root. The second is a historically well rounded study where civilization is seen as a network of specific historical, geographical, economic, political, cultural and social complexes, and not primarily as transhistorical cultural complexes. Such civilizations follow the pattern of emergence, rise, decline, and fall. In such an approach, it is difficult to talk – as Huntington does – of any specific civilization, let alone of many such civilizations existing through millennia. [33]

Vanaik further argues that the concept of culture bears a dual connotation – essence and process. [34] Many a

# The Clash of Civilizations Thesis: A Critical Appraisal

Written by Deepshikha Shahi

twentieth century civilization theorist of Weberian cast saw civilizations as 'cultural visions' that have soul, spirit, ethos, or *mentalité*, which remain basically unaltered. Here, culture is understood as an essence. By contrast, in a more materialist rendering of civilization which pays more attention to the problems of cultural transmission, the virtual isomorphism of culture is averted. Here, culture is viewed as a process. Vanaik continues that throughout modern Western intellectual history, there have been significant contestations of the cultural approach to the study of civilizations, an insistence that change is as basic as continuity to the cultural dimension of the civilization entity in question, and that the continuity of political structures may often better explain the continuity of the cultural tradition itself. Such an understanding wholly rejects Huntington's insistence on religion being the determining component of culture. As opposed to the idea of religious resurrection proposed by Huntington, Vanaik demonstrates how there is an increasing desirability and possibility of a decline of religion as the space occupied by it is shrinking in modern societies. He admits that humans must have identity for psychological wellbeing and stability, however this need for identity now exists more for personal-social, rather than for cosmic-meaning reasons. Therefore, religious identity, *per se*, is neither inescapable, nor essential.[35]

## *Ethical Critique*

The ethical critique condemns the immoral implications of Huntington's thesis. It proclaims that the clash of civilizations is a purposeful thesis that serves particular interests. Edward W. Said revealed that Huntington formulated his thesis while keeping an eye on rivals in the policy making ranks, theorists such as Francis Fukuyama and his 'end of history' idea, as well as the legions who had celebrated the onset of globalism and the dissipation of the states. Naz Wasim confirms that Huntington's thesis was a strategy to influence US foreign and defence policy.[36] In this regard, Hans Kung pinpoints the fact that Huntington was an advisor to the Pentagon in 1994.

Interestingly the personal ambition of Huntington was in tandem with the expansionary goals of US policy makers. The declaration of a possibility of World War III by Huntington fit well with the needs of the US arms industry. Noam Chomsky highlights that every year the White House presents to Congress a statement describing reasons for having a huge military budget. For fifty years, it used the pretext of a Soviet threat. However, after the end of the Cold War, that pretext was gone. Therefore, Huntington constructed the Islamic threat as a pretext to justify the need for maintaining and enhancing the defence-industrial base.[37] Thus, Huntington's thesis is in fact an *enemy discourse* that looks for new enemies. Muhammad Asadi further adds that Huntington's thesis serves two purposes. First, it enables the extraction of manpower and funds from the American people for the ulterior motives of American elites. Second, it alters the agenda of the rest of the world, particularly the underdeveloped part of it, away from domestic issues, and towards conducting America's wars.[38]

The ethical critique also asserts that Huntington's thesis is a self-fulfilling prophecy. It causes the expected event to occur, and thus, verifies its own accuracy. John Ikenberry says that Huntington's thesis is the civilizational equivalent of the security dilemma, in which misperception about the other eventually increases tension, and then leads to conflict. He feels that if the ideas of prominent thinkers have any impact on the real world, then the clash of civilizations thesis is potentially dangerous.[39] Amartya Sen, in a letter to Robert Kagan, expressed similar apprehension by stating that the violent tendency within Islam is not only because of the 'pull' of resurgent Islam, but also due to the 'push' of distancing coming from the Western parochialism that characterises Huntington's thesis.[40]

The validity of all these criticisms was proved to a considerable extent by several empirical studies. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart used the World Values Survey database to compare the social and political values of Western and Muslim societies and concluded that Muslims have no less democratic ideals than the West.[41] Manus I. Mildarsky similarly found that there was no negative association between Islam and democracy.[42] Bruce Russett, John Oneal, and Michaelene Cox investigated inter-state disputes between 1885 to 1994 to conclude that it is not the civilizations, but the traditional realist and liberal variables – geography, power alliances, democracy, economic interdependence, and international organisation – that define the fault lines along which international conflict is apt to occur.[43]

Though the critiques of Huntington's thesis point out its various flaws, they are much weaker when it comes to explaining its receptivity. This is not just amongst decision-makers and shapers, but also amongst the general population. It is to this point that the discipline of psychology can provide a critical insight.

# The Clash of Civilizations Thesis: A Critical Appraisal

Written by Deepshikha Shahi

## Designing a Psychological Critique

Despite the copious criticisms targeting Huntington's epistemology, methodology and ethics – the clash of civilizations thesis flourishes throughout the globe. Any attempt to check this trend requires a serious probing into the issue of how people become so receptive to such a provocative body of knowledge. In other words, how does a provocative idea, like Huntington's thesis, interact with the psyche of the people, so as to transform them into its agents?

In this regard, Philip G. Zimbardo notes that the process by which hostile schemas, aggressive scripts and other types of knowledge structures are activated is a cognitive one that can – with practice – become completely automatic and operate without awareness.[44] As such, the easy receptivity of Huntington's thesis can be grasped by decoding its cognitive role. A more detailed account of the psychic dimension of knowledge structures can be traced in the work of Ilan Gur Zeev. He claims that the control of the legitimisation, production, representation, and distribution of knowledge makes possible the reduction of human beings into 'subjects', who then function as the agents of that knowledge structure. He refers to such a control as 'normalised education' and explains that this normalised education commands the psyche of the subjects on four levels: (1) Control of the psychic constitution and strivings of the subjects; (2) Control of the conceptual apparatus and its integration with the psychic level of the subjects; (3) Control of the collective and private self-consciousness of the subjects; (4) Control of the functions of the subjects in order to minimise the possibilities for change in the representation of reality that normalised education reflects and serves.[45] These insights support the inference that Huntington's thesis acquires receptivity by controlling the psyche of the people in a way that any normalised education does.

Keith Lehrer further elaborates upon the psychological functioning of an accepted knowledge structure. He states that the acceptance of knowledge is a sort of mental state that has a specific functional role, in thought, inference, and action.[46] He claims that when a person accepts a body of knowledge, then the person will apply it in the appropriate circumstances and use it to justify other conclusions. Such a person will reason and act in a certain manner assuming the truth of that body of knowledge. In this regard, Huntington's thesis can be viewed as an accepted body of knowledge that thrives upon its ability to mould the reasoning and actions of people in a restrictive manner.

The academic discipline of psychology can serve as a lens through which the nature and warrants of Huntington's thesis can be seen, and its subterfuges and destructive forces can be perceived. Psychology broadly offers three models for studying human behaviour – *psychoanalytic*, *behaviouristic* and *humanistic-existential*. Each of these models can be utilised for evaluating the receptivity of Huntington's thesis. Since each model is rooted in a distinct philosophical tradition and relies on a distinct methodology, they provide a distinct understanding of the psychological mediation involved in the translation of the aggressive claims of Huntington's thesis into violent outcomes. However, this study holds the opinion that the humanistic-existential model is more appropriate as it has a methodological edge over the other models.

### *Psychoanalytic Model*

The first use of the term 'psychoanalysis' was made by Freud in 1896 in his paper entitled *Heredity and the Aetiology of the Neurosis*. [47] The basic tenet was a deterministic theory of human behaviour based on the laws of the mind. For Freud, psychoanalysis was aimed at discovering the functioning of the unconscious. His functionalist approach was two-fold: one level was concerned with inherent instincts and the other level was concerned with the psychic mechanism of displacement.[48] First, it proposed that there is an inherent instinct in human beings that is destructive and moves towards self-destruction. Freud described it as the opposite to the principle of Eros, and called it Thanos – the death wish. Second, it is proposed that individuals displace emotions, frustration and aggression – which are essentially part of their private emotional lives – away from their personal relationships and project them into political life. The themes of sex and aggression are interlinked in Freudian literature.[49]

Freud assigned a specific role to civilization and religion under his twofold approach. Firstly, since instinctual aggression is a hard reality of life, which the civilised society finds a bitter pill to swallow – religion is discovered as

# The Clash of Civilizations Thesis: A Critical Appraisal

Written by Deepshikha Shahi

the *future of an illusion*. Religion promises happiness after death as a compensation for the renunciation of instinctual aggression in this life.[50] Karl Jung concludes that instead of a blissful feeling of merger with a literal God (conventionally a religious experience), religion can be an inward connection to one's psyche.[51] Secondly, since there is a psychic mechanism of aggression displacement at work, the institutionalised civilization or religion binds together a considerable number of people in love so long as there are people of other civilizations or religions who receive the manifestation of their aggressiveness. Rene Girard claims that religion offers a fantasy system to enact immensely violent acts in a sacrosanct manner to preserve order in society.[52]

This psychoanalytic understanding of civilization can help to comprehend the basic appeal of Huntington's thesis. Huntington's categorisation of the global population along so-called civilizational lines mainly focuses on religious divisions. Since people are, by and large, religious and they experience 'religion' and 'violence' as yoked together, they find the idea of civilizational clash somewhat attractive and normal.

However, the psychoanalytic model becomes problematic as it is not compatible with certain assertions of Huntington's thesis. For instance, the psychoanalytic image of religion as an 'illusion' or 'fantasy system' is universal in terms of applicability. Thus, Huntington's act of singling out Islam as the most perverse form of religion that particularly breeds demons is objectionable. The motivation for religiously driven murderous zeal can be traced in radical extremists, not only among Muslims, but certainly among Christians and Jews, as well. Moreover, since the inherently aggressive instinct is universal, there may be a considerable number of people who do not believe in religion but are violent. Furthermore, there may be people who do not consciously or unconsciously practice religion for the purpose of suppressing or releasing their violent instincts.

The psychoanalytic model became obsolete as its traditional method of introspection was opposed by the movement of positivism, objectivism and empiricism that became a zeitgeist by the end of the nineteenth century. The early twentieth century saw the rise of behaviourism which stood for the use of the experimental method of the natural sciences.

## *Behaviouristic Model*

This model was born in 1913 with a paper written by J.B. Watson entitled *Psychology as the Behaviourist Views It*. The basic maxim was the positive correlation between stimulus and response. Conclusions derived from animal experiments were applied to study human behaviour. The first classic experiment was carried out by Ivan Pavlov, wherein a dog was repeatedly presented with food and sound simultaneously. Consequently, the sound acquired the strength of food and created saliva in a dog's mouth even in the absence of food. The dog had developed a *conditioned reflex*. [53] In 1914 Pavlov discovered that a neurosis-like symptom can be developed in dogs by disturbing the conditioned reflex. In an experiment a dog was conditioned to discriminate between a circle and an ellipse. The ellipse was then gradually modified to look more and more like a circle. The dog failed to discriminate and showed great discomfort and tension. It tore off the experimental apparatus and exhibited signs of nervous breakdown or 'experimental neurosis'.

In the light of the conclusions derived from Pavlov's experiments, Huntington's thesis can be viewed as a stimulus that provokes violent response in both Muslim and Western societies. Within Muslim society it works in two ways. Firstly, it functions as a conditioning mechanism that repeatedly demonises Muslims, thereby psychologically compelling them to act as such. Secondly, it works as an irritant that disturbs the traditionally conditioned reflexes of Muslims by insulting them for how they have always been. The discrimination between the Islamic notion of 'good' and 'bad', as it traditionally occurs to Muslim minds, is deeply distorted by Huntington's thesis, which in turn fuels violent tendencies.

If Huntington's thesis presents an inferior picture of Islam, it projects a superior image of the West, thereby stimulating an aggressive response from the West to assert and safeguard its abnormally elevated pride. The net result of this deliberate construction of a gulf between the respective self-esteem of Islam and the West is a sort of academic warfare which can be witnessed by the development of a counter-thesis in response to the clash of civilizations thesis of Huntington. Gilles Kepel in his book *The War for Muslim Minds* portrays Ayman al-Zawahiri's

# The Clash of Civilizations Thesis: A Critical Appraisal

Written by Deepshikha Shahi

text *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner* as a jihadist reading of the clash of civilizations. Michael Dunn refers to the popularity of these texts in the Muslim world and reveals that these texts are developed as an essential form of discourse by two powerful groups of elites – the Western policymakers and the leaders of the al-Qaida network – in order to infuriate the masses.

The behaviouristic model was further enriched when Pavlov's experiments found an extension in the work of B.F. Skinner, J.B. Watson and E.L. Thorndike. They conducted learning experiments where response occurred without a visible stimulus – similar to what often happens in real life situations. For instance, Skinner placed a food-deprived rat in a box, which then accidentally pressed a lever that released a food pellet. The rat in Skinner's experiment had to operate upon the environment, unlike the dog in Pavlov's experiment which did nothing to obtain the food. These learning experiments emphasised the role of environment and started a trend which shifted the biological orientation of psychology to a socio-cultural one. Neo-Freudians like Adler, Horney, Fromm and Marcuse argued in a Marxist vein that the demand for repression of instincts comes from the alienating socio-economic structure of a society, unlike the Freudian understanding where repression is a protective ego-defence created by the individual.[54]

This neo-Freudian/Marxist line of argument suggests that the notion of civilizational clash wins acceptance because it reflects the aspirations of rich people in the West and the destitute people of the Muslim world, who find themselves at war with each other due to their location within a particular socio-cultural circumstance. As such, the acceptability of the idea of civilizational clash should be perceived as a symptom of socio-economic deprivations faced by Muslims in the context of global capitalist insecurity.

However, the behaviouristic model also becomes disputable as it fails to adequately deal with certain aspects of Huntington's thesis. In addition, there are exceptions among elites, as well as masses, that neither believe in, nor respond to, the provocative stimulus unleashed by Huntington's thesis. Moreover, a similar socio-cultural circumstance does not always ensure behavioural similarity. Responses to the same objective situation differ considerably from person to person, depending on each person's social learning history (i.e. personality) and present state of mind (i.e. which knowledge structure is currently most accessible).[55] Therefore every rich American and every poor Muslim need not find a foe in each other.

The extremely restrictive explanation of human behaviour as a response to stimulus increasingly became unacceptable. Since behaviour will always be conditioned, it is only wise to condition it efficiently. But, shocked and appalled critics – sensing faint hints of fascism – wondered who will decide the goals of humanity? Who is to be trusted to carry out the proper conditioning? These worries paved the way for the humanistic-existential model of psychology that rejected both the savage image of man nourished by psychoanalysis as well as the robot image of man nurtured by behaviourism. It thereby attempted to find a middle ground between these two extreme positions.

## *Humanistic-Existential Model*

This model focused on the uniqueness of human existence and provided maximum scope for human agency. It attempted to understand human needs as they stem from the conditions of existence.[56] However, this did not imply a total surrender to conditioning factors as an explanation of human behaviour. The emphasis on experience, stress on creativity, concern for dignity and allegiance to meaningful problems for study constituted its foundation stones.[57] It realised that the beautifully executed, precise, and elegant experiments of psychology, in at least half the cases, have nothing to do with enduring human problems.[58] Maslow lamented that psychology has been long obsessed with the deviant, the sick and the criminal, ignoring the normal. Laing further argued that the abnormal is indeed a sane person maladjusted in an insane society.[59] Thus, from the standpoint of human values, the abnormal is less crippled than the kind of normal person who has lost individuality in the process of adjustment in society.[60] Szasz asserted that the myth of mental illness is created by the society.[61] The standard psychiatric patient is an artefact of a standard psychiatrist and a standard mental hospital. In fact, human behaviour is exquisitely rational moving with subtle and ordered complexity towards the goals our organism is endeavouring to achieve.[62]

According to this model, a combination of two paradoxical forces determine human behaviour. The first is the free agency of the individual who is personally responsible for creating meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. The



# The Clash of Civilizations Thesis: A Critical Appraisal

Written by Deepshikha Shahi

second is the compulsion of the conditions of existence that affects the individual's willingness or unwillingness to create or believe in a particular set of meanings. From this perspective, Huntington's thesis becomes agreeable because of two reasons. The first is Huntington's willingness to generate a specific notion of reality and the second is the people's choice to identify their own perception of reality with that notion. In other words, Huntington's presentation of an imagined reality (i.e. false consciousness), which is fraught with a civilizational clash, becomes an actual reality (i.e. false real consciousness) only when people choose to internalise it and act, or react, upon it.[63] The purpose behind Huntington's choice to present reality in a particular way and the people's choice to accept it lies in their respective conditions of existence. In the given circumstance, the prospect of a civilizational clash serves the purpose of its believers, thereby enabling it to acquire a meaning even if it is utterly meaningless.

The discernments obtained from the humanistic-existential model forcefully challenge the authenticity of Huntington's thesis. They reveal the disguised manipulative venture of Huntington who disregards the uniqueness of human existence by deliberately laying down the standards of a 'truly civilised society' and demonising those who fail to fit those standards, thereby manufacturing a myth of civilizational pathology.

Under the conditions of the post-Cold War world, the superficial concept of 'bloody Islamic borders' enabled Huntington to gain an influential position among US foreign policymakers who were desperately looking for an alarming sermon which could cover their aggressive policies under the mask of legitimate defensive action. Huntington's intentional ignorance of the painful conditions of existence in Muslim societies and his attribution of their consequent frustration to a kind of civilizational-cultural-religious disorder gave a new meaning to persisting political issues. This new meaning served the purpose of its believers at many levels. Firstly, it helped US policymakers to divert the attention of both Muslims and non-Muslims away from the genuine suffering and the creative potential of the Islamic world, thereby facilitating an ensured American hegemony. Secondly, it allowed the fanatics in both Islamic and Western societies to enrage the masses, thereby paving the way for satisfying their personal ambitions.

Though Huntington's dangerous motive becomes quite apparent as soon as he activates his abstract idea of 'civilizational identity' by awakening a hatred for other civilizations, it is well-received by the people who find it relevant and useful in their living conditions.[64] The cascading effect of the abstract idea of 'civilizational identity' totally obscures the complexity of human identity formation and thus weakens the effort at human emancipation. However, the humanistic-existential model is optimistic in its assertion that Huntington's thesis acquires receptivity, not because it discloses some identifiable ultimate truth about innate human nature or emits provocative stimulations to which human beings are bound to succumb. The popularity of it is largely an outcome of the personal choice of human beings who are embedded in their respective conditions of existence as free agents.

As such, the issue of acceptance or rejection becomes a matter of free choice and the onus for exploring its harmful implications rest on free individuals. The essence of this insight can be traced in the following Zimbardo homily: While a few bad apples might spoil the barrel (filled with good fruit/people), a barrel filled with vinegar will always transform sweet cucumbers into sour pickles – regardless of the best intentions, resilience and genetic nature of those cucumbers. So, does it make more sense to spend our resources on an attempt to identify, isolate and destroy the few bad apples or to learn how vinegar works so that we can teach cucumbers how to avoid undesirable vinegar barrels?

## Notes

[1] Vanaik, Achin, 2007 *Masks of Empire* Tulika Books, p2.

[2] Huntington, Samuel P. November-December 1993 'If Not Civilizations, What?: Paradigms of the Post-Cold War World', *Foreign Affairs*, pp.187-189.

[3] Three years before the arrival of Huntington's thesis, Bernard Lewis talked about the clash of civilizations. See Lewis, Bernard September 1990 'The Roots of Muslim Rage: Why so many Muslims Deeply Resent the West and Why Their Bitterness Will Not be Easily Mollified' *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 266, No. 3, pp 47-58.

# The Clash of Civilizations Thesis: A Critical Appraisal

Written by Deepshikha Shahi

- [4] Huntington, Samuel P. Summer 1993 'The Clash of Civilizations?' *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 72, No. 3, pp. 21-49.
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] Huntington, Samuel P. Summer 1993 'The Clash of Civilizations?' *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 72, No. 3, pp. 21-49.
- [7] Huntington, Samuel P. 1996, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Penguin, pp. 262-265.
- [8] Huntington, Samuel P. November-December 1996 'The West Unique, Not Universal', *Foreign Affairs*, p. 45.
- [9] Rubenstein, Richard E. and Crocker, Jarle 'Challenging Huntington' *Foreign Policy*, No. 96 (Fall, 1994), pp 115-117.
- [10] Hussein, Seifudein Adem 2001 'On the End of History and the Clash of Civilizations: A Dissenter's View' *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 21, NO. 1, p. 32.
- [11] Kung, Hans 'Inter-Cultural Dialogue Versus Confrontation' in Schmiegleow, Henrik (ed) 1999 *Preventing the Clash of Civilizations: A Peace Strategy for the Twenty-First Century*, St. Martin's Press, p 103.
- [12] Ikenberry, G. John March-April 1997 'Just Like the Rest,' *Foreign Affairs*, p. 163 and Rubenstein, op.cit, p 117.
- [13] Said, op.cit.
- [14] Monshipouri, Mahmood and Petonito, Gina Autumn 1995 'Constructing the Enemy in the Post-Cold War Era: The Flaws of the Islamic Conspiracy Theory' *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 37, No. 4, pp. 773-792.
- [15] Mahubani, Kishore Summer 1992 'The West and the Rest', *National Interest*, Issue 28, pp. 10-14.
- [16] Dorraj, Manochehr December 1998, 'In the Throes of Civilizational Conflict', *Peace Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 633-637.
- [17] Dunn, Michael Winter 2006-2007 'The Clash of Civilizations and the War on Terror', *49<sup>th</sup> Parallel*, Vol. 20 available at <http://www.49thparallel.bham.ac.uk/back/issue20/Dunn.pdf>
- [18] Roy, Oliver 2004 *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, Hurst and Company, p9.
- [19] Kepel, Gilles 2004 *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West*, Belknap Press, p99.
- [20] Barber, Benjamin 2003 *Jihad vs. Mcworld*, Corgi, p.xv.
- [21] See the book review of the Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order by Richard Rosecrance December 1998 *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 92, No. 4, p978-980.
- [22] Halliday, Fred 1996 *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation*, St. Martin's Press, p 217.
- [23] Ahmad, Aijaz 2008 'Islam, Islamisms and the West', *Socialist Register* available at [http://www.iran-bulletin.org/political%20islam/SR\\_08\\_Ahmad\\_0.pdf](http://www.iran-bulletin.org/political%20islam/SR_08_Ahmad_0.pdf)
- [24] Kalin, Ibrahim 2001 'Islam and the West: Deconstructing Monolithic Perceptions-A Conversation With Professor John Esposito' *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp 155-163.
- [25] Ahrari, M.E., Spring 1997 'The Clash of Civilizations: An Old Story or New Truth?', *New Perspectives Quarterly*,

# The Clash of Civilizations Thesis: A Critical Appraisal

Written by Deepshikha Shahi

Vol. 14. No. 2, pp 56-61.

[26] Hunter, Shireen T. 1998 *The Future of Islam and the West: Clash of Civilizations or Peaceful Coexistence?*, Praeger, p 169.

[27] Ajami, Fouad, September-October 1993 'The Summoning' *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 72, No. 4, pp 7-8.

[28] See the book review of *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* by Robert Marks Spring 2002 *Journal of World History*, Vol. 11, No.1, pp101-104.

[29] Sato, Seizaburo October 1997 'The Clash of Civilizations: A View from Japan', *Asia Pacific Review* 4, pp. 7-23.

[30] Sridhar, V., November 24 – December 7 2001 'Chomsky in India', *Frontline*, Vol. 18, No. 24, available at <http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl1824/18240230.htm>

[31] Hunter, op.cit, pp19-20.

[32] Kurth, James Summer 2001 'American and the West: Global Triumph or Western Twilight ?', *Orbis*, pp. 333-341.

[33] Vanaik, Achin 1997 *The Furies of Indian Communalism: Religion, Modernity and Secularization*, Verso, pp 130-137.

[34] Achin Vanaik endorses Raymond Williams' dynamic vision of culture as a process rather than a static view of culture as a 'class of things, shared' or a 'state of affairs' because the former is more fit for modern societies. For details see Williams, Raymond 1981 *Culture*, Fontana Press.

[35] Vanaik, op.cit, pp 65-129.

[36] Wasim, Naz 'Challenging Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations: The Shared Tradition of Europe, and Islam*' in International Conference on the Dialogue of Civilizations, 31 July to 3 August, 2001 available at <http://www.unu.edu/dialogue/conf-report.pdf>

[37] <http://www.india-seminar.com/2002/509/509%20noam%20chomsky.htm>

[38] Asadi, op.cit.

[39] Ikenberry, op.cit, pp 162-163

[40] Amartya Sen, letter to Robert Kagan, 'Is there a Clash of Civilizations?', *Slate Magazine*,

(Posted Friday, May 5, 2006, at 11:52 PM).

[41] Norris, op.cit, pp 11-12.

[42] Mildarsky, Manus I. 1998 'Democracy and Islam: Implication for Civilization Conflict and the Democratic Peace', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 3, pp. 485-511.

[43] Russet, Bruce (et.al) September 2002 'Clash of Civilizations or Realism and Liberalism Deja Vu? Some Evidence', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 378, No. 5, pp 583-608.

[44] Zimbardo, Philip G. 2004 'A Situationist Perspective on the Psychology of Evil' in Miller, Arthur G.(ed.)*The Social Psychology of Good and Evil*, Guilford Publications, pp 178-182.

# The Clash of Civilizations Thesis: A Critical Appraisal

Written by Deepshikha Shahi

- [45] Michael A. Peters. 2015 *Education, Globalization and the State in the Age of Terrorism*, Routledge, p. 233.
- [46] Lehrer, Keith 2000 *Theory of Knowledge*, Westview Press, pp 39-40.
- [47] Singh, Amar Kumar December 1998 'The Concept of Man in Psychology', *Social Change*, Vol.28, No.4, p. 6.
- [48] Bloom, William 1990 *Personal Identity, National Identity and International Relations*, Cambridge, pp 7-8.
- [49] Freud, Sigmund 1953 *Civilization and its Discontents*, Hogarth Press, p 85. (originally published in 1930).
- [50] Freud, Sigmund 1961 *Future of an Illusion*, Hogarth Press (originally published in 1927).
- [51] Piven, Jerry S. 2002 'On the Psychosis (Religion) of Terrorists' in Stout, Chris E. (ed) *The Psychology of Terrorism* Vol. III, Praeger , pp 119-140.
- [52] Stirling, Mack, C. 'Violent Religion: Rene Girard's Theory of Culture' in Ellens, op.cit, pp11-50.
- [53] Pavlov, Ivan 1941 ' Lectures on Conditioned Reflexes', Vol. 2: *Conditioned Reflexes and Psychiatry* translated and edited by W.H. Gantt, Lawrence and Wishart Ltd. available at <http://www.heretical.com/pavlov/chap-50.html>
- [54] Singh, p.19.
- [55] Zimbardo, p.177.
- [56] Fromm, Eric 1955, *The Sane Society*, Fawcett Premier Books, pp 31-32.
- [57] Buhler, C. and Allen M. 1972 *Introduction to Humanistic Psychology*, Brooks / Cole, pp1-2.
- [58] Maslow, A. 'A Philosophy of Psychology' in Severin, F. (ed) 1965 *Humanistic Viewpoints in Psychology*, McGraw Hill, pp 17-33.
- [59] Laing, Ronald D. 1967 *The Politics of Experience*, Ballantine, p. 58.
- [60] Fromm, Eric P 1942 *Fear of Freedom*, Routledge, p 120.
- [61] Szasz, T.S. 1960 'The Myth of Mental Illness' *American Psychologist*, Vol. 15, pp 113-118.
- [62] Rogers, C.R. 1961 *On Becoming a Person*, Houghton Mifflin, p 194.
- [63] Achin Vanaik uses the term 'false real consciousness' to suggest that any ideology that arouses 'false consciousness' does not posit a false world as an alternative to the real world, but a false way of experiencing and relating to the real world. See Vanaik, p.79.
- [64] Huntington subscribes to Michael Dibdin's idea, as expressed in his novel '*Dead Lagoon*', that unless we hate what we are not, we cannot love what we are. See Huntington, Samuel P. 1996 *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Penguin, p.20

---

## About the author:

**Deepshikha Shahi** is Associate Professor of Politics and International Relations at the O. P. Jindal Global

## **The Clash of Civilizations Thesis: A Critical Appraisal**

Written by Deepshikha Shahi

University, India. Her research interests revolve around the theoretical frames of Global International Relations, non-Western intellectual resources, pedagogical practices, politics of knowledge-production, and Indian politics. Her recent publications include *Global IR Research Programme: A Futuristic Foundation of 'One and Many'* (2023, Palgrave Macmillan), *Sufism: A Theoretical Intervention in Global International Relations* (2020, Rowman and Littlefield), and *Advaita as a Global International Relations Theory* (2019, Routledge).