

When Religion and the Law Fuse Huntington's Thesis Is Evident both Empirically and Normatively

Wolfgang Merkel

When the world fell apart, the Soviet Empire imploded, and a wave of transformation processes engulfed Eastern Europe, Asia, Latin America and even sub-Saharan Africa. Not only moribund dictatorial regimes but also old certainties were swept away. The short twentieth century came to an abrupt end. The intellectual accompaniment was provided by two essays that promised new certainty in the new disarray. Promised? No, prophesied!

In 1992, Francis Fukuyama announced the “end of history.” In a both bold and casuistic simplification of Hegel's philosophy of history, he declared the competition between systems at an end. Liberal capitalism and liberal democracy had finally vanquished the planned economy and dictatorship. At its apogee, history had now come into its own. A good two decades later, this prophesy has crumbled away under violent hybrid regimes in the grey zone between democracy and autocracy. Capitalism, by contrast, has imposed itself worldwide and not always in its liberal form: witness China, Russia, and Ukraine.

A year later a second, truly prophetic essay from the pen of one of the world's most renowned political scientists appeared: “The Next Pattern of Conflict,” better known under the title “The Clash of Civilizations.” In brief it claimed that the “great divisions among humankind” would no longer be between nation states. The dominating lines of conflict would be cultural. Huntington sees civilizations as the highest and broadest form of collective cultural identity. They are defined in terms of language, history, religion, tradition, customs, and subjective self-identification. For Huntington, too, however, identities are not fixed for all time. They change. Human beings themselves set, change, and redefine the boundaries. This constructivist reservation is often overlooked by critics of Huntington's alleged naturalism. Nevertheless, he does something highly problematic. He claims to identify eight major civilizations in the world: “Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African civilization.”

This has been criticized by ethnologists, sociologists, political scientists, and in many an academic seminar. And rightly so, but what of it! Huntington blends religious, regional, ethnic, and national classification criteria into a single typology. And he ignores internal differentiation within “civilizations.” However, it would be naive to assume that a political scientist of his calibre was not aware of what he was doing. He was not interested in methodological finger exercises but in the normative and above all realpolitical incompatibilities and future conflicts between different “civilizations.”

This double incompatibility, he claimed, would give birth to the conflicts of the future: from Bosnia and Kosovo in the Balkans of the 1990s to the persistent conflicts in Nigeria, Sudan, Mali, the Caucasus, the Philippines, and Thailand up to and including 9/11, Madrid, London, and Paris. The realpolitical clash between the Islamic world and the rest also presents itself with deadly evidence in Huntington's account, too. But he overlooked the fact that religious-fundamentalist intransigence has long been at work within “Islamic civilization”: between Sunnis and Shi'ites, Iran and Saudi Arabia, in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, and between the Palestinian “brothers” Hamas and Fatah. “The” Islamic “world” is not homogeneous. It is itself criss-crossed by religious fault lines, as was the Occident of the Wars of Religion in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Summary: Samuel Huntington's thesis of future conflict lines along cultural, ethnic, and religious fault lines may be questioned in detail. But in hindsight, the general validity of the idea of a the clash between contemporary Western and Islamic civilizations is evident at both the empirical and normative levels. For the West, this means: We must defend as non-negotiable values of our societies self-determination, equality between the sexes, freedom of the press, the freedom to criticize religion and to choose one's religion.

In some religions, namely the monotheistic faiths, we are witnessing a fundamentalization that reaches from the Bible Belt in the United States and ultra-orthodox Judaism in Israel to the Islamic world. Monotheistic religions, owing to their dogmatic nature, tend to hold an inbuilt potential for intolerance (Jan Assmann). Huntington quotes George Weigel: "The unsecularization of the world is one of the dominant social facts of life in the late twentieth century." As Gilles Kepel puts it, the revival of religion comes as "la revanche de dieu." In the West, however, this revenge is curbed constitutionally. The far-reaching separation of state and church as a consequence of bloody religious wars in the 16th and 17th, and the enlightenment in the 18th century "privatized" religious fundamentalism in the United States and in Israel subjects it to the rule of law.

Islam has known no Renaissance when a Machiavelli could recast the concept of divine order to favor human self-government. Nor does Islam have any philosophical tradition of social contract theory that makes the exercise of power dependent on consent. It has known no Enlightenment to confront religion with reason. Scepticism and self-irony are alien to it. At times, murderous fatwas penalize satire. The spell cast by a religious interpretation of the world has never been broken, the theocentric view of the world has never been replaced by an anthropocentric conception.

Particularly problematic for the compatibility of Islamic civilization with democracy is the fusion of religion and law. Religious norms that claim universal truth constrain the principle of popular sovereignty in a manner irreconcilable with the idea of democratic self-government. Religion and the state order merge. Supervision is vested in interpreters of sacred scripture. They lay down family law and the law of succession, issue dress and dietary rules and submit individual sexuality to repressive dictums. In the traditionalist and fundamentalist societies of Islamic civilization, apostasy, homosexuality, and adultery (by women) are punished by the severest of sanctions.

The validity of Huntington's thesis of the clash between contemporary Western and Islamic civilizations is evident at both the empirical and normative levels. It is not to be repudiated by pointing out the methodological and conceptual weaknesses of his arguments. Still less can it be brushed aside with the logically nonsensical but politically correct assertion that there is no clash of civilizations ("is" statement), that we must rather conduct a "dialogue between cultures" ("ought" statement).

The latter is certainly incontestable. My critique of the main manifest variants of political and religious Islamism is inspired by the emancipatory values of the enlightenment and steers clear of the morass of brown xenophobic resentments. But we can conduct an honest dialogue between different cultures and worldviews (Weltanschauungen) only if we are certain of our own normative references. We must establish the non-negotiable principles and values of our civilization. They include self-determination, equality between the sexes, freedom of the press, the freedom to criticize religion and to choose one's religion. If we abandon these principles under pressure from the nugatory reproach of post-colonial ethnocentrism, our convictions will dissipate in a normatively empty mix of multicultural indifference.



Wolfgang Merkel is director of the WZB research unit Democracy and Democratization and Professor of Comparative Political Science and Democracy Research at the Humboldt University of Berlin. He is also co-head of the WZB Center for Global Constitutionalism. (Photo: David Ausserhofer) wolfgang.merkel@wzb.eu