

Book Review

EAST AND THE WEST

DIALOGUE IS THE WAY FORWARD

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan

“The Clash of Civilizations?” Asian Responses, edited by Salim Rashid, Dhaka: The University Press, pp. , Taka 400.00.

In 1993, the well-known American journal, *Foreign Affairs*, published an article entitled, “The Clash of Civilizations?” by Professor Samuel Huntington, an academic based at Harvard University. According to the editors of *Foreign Affairs* no other article had generated so much discussion and debate since George Kennan’s “X” article on political and, by extension, cultural containment in the 1940’s. Not unexpectedly, some people such as Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Francis Fukuyama openly praised Huntington’s thesis, while others like Ali Al-Amin Mazrui, Paul Hammond and Amit Gupta not only disagreed with Huntington’s thesis but they also wrote cogent critiques. Later, this article was developed into a book by Huntington and published in 1996 under the title of “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order” (London: Simon and Schuster, pp367). In this book – which continues to be read widely in the United States to this day, Huntington provocatively drew the emerging global fault lines that, in his opinion, would lead to the clash of civilizations. His arguments subsequently inspired the neo-conservative writers, journalists and policy-makers in the United States to pursue an interventionist foreign policy under the Bush administration, leading to considerable global tension and upheaval.

In the original article, Huntington wrote, “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 civilization. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.”(p1)

According to Huntington, there are seven major contemporary civilizations, namely the Chinese (he also refers to it as ‘Confucian’ and ‘Sinic’), Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Orthodox (Russian), Western (Europe and United States), and Latin American. After looking at each one of these civilizations, he came to the conclusion that, the Western civilization is on an unavoidable collision with the major civilizations of Islam and China. Strangely enough, Huntington is not a specialist or an expert in either of the civilizations he singled out as a potential ‘threat’ or ‘enemy’. In fact, he is not a recognised authority or specialist in any one of the six civilizations he probed in order to decide whether they could pose a threat to the Western world then or in the future. This obviously called into question Huntington’s entire thesis. How can someone who is not intimately acquainted with those civilizations decide whether they possess the necessary tools to pose a threat to the West or become its potential ‘enemy’? As expected, Huntington’s critics were very quick to point out his inadequate knowledge and grasp of his subject-matter.

“The Clash of Civilizations?” Asian Responses, edited by Professor Salim Rashid is a good example of the numerous publications that have been published by academics from all over the world in response to Huntington’s original thesis and his subsequent publications. This book, comprising of Huntington’s own original article as it appeared in the *Foreign Affairs* journal and seven other articles written by a group of prominent political thinkers and social scientists (who are also acquainted with their own civilizations), argues against Huntington’s thesis and, by extension, the wider neo-conservative agenda that is current in the US. In the first article, the internationally respected social scientist and cultural philosopher, Professor Ali Al-Amin Mazrui, raises three significant objections to Huntington’s thesis. Firstly, he argues that the latter’s thesis is factually flawed. He states, “Conceivably, it may not be factually true that the main lines of conflict of the future following the Cold war

will be lines of clash of civilizations. It could be states or economic blocs.”(p27)
Secondly, he argues there is a conceptual fallacy to Huntington’s thesis. “Can what he identifies”, argues Mazrui, “as civilization be something else? Huntington himself asks ‘if not civilization then what?’ Could it be a case of stage three of racial conflicts in world history rather than clash of civilizations?”(p.27) Lastly, according to Mazrui, the worst mistake Huntington committed in his clash of civilizations thesis is in his assumption that the clash will happen in the future when in fact it has been “generating tensions between Europe and the rest of the world for at least four to five hundred years” (p29). He cites the trans-Atlantic slave trade and European colonisation of much of the world as examples.

In the second article, Abul Kalam, a Fulbright Scholar and Professor of International Relations at Dhaka University, Bangladesh, argues that Huntington’s thesis is fundamentally flawed because it deliberately endeavours to espouse and envisage a hegemonic vision of global politics and governance under the guise of systemic concern. Professor Kalam writes, “...Behind an apparent concern for world order and stability, Huntington actually conceives an hegemonic system in which power, race, and culture are destined to play the major role...his paradigm [also] has basic theoretical problem and even the approach he recommends for his objective of U.S. and/or Western dominance is self-defeating.” (p40) The author of the third article, Amit Gupta, is scathing and dismissive of Huntington’s whole thesis. He states, “Huntington’s analysis is faulty because it ignores key historical and cultural facts. Secondly, his analysis exaggerates the cohesiveness of civilizations. Thirdly, he underestimates the impact of economic and cultural forces in bringing the world together. Finally, Huntington’s approach actually reflects a general state of unease in the West caused by growing economic disparities, changing demographic patterns, and the inability to enforce its vision of a new world order.”(p66)

C. J. W. L. Wee of Singapore however avoids making any direct references to Huntington and the neo-con agenda. Instead he takes a brief look at the new discourse that is emerging on the creation of a so-called ‘East Asian modernity’ as opposed to an *Asianised* modernity which is all too often employed as a culturalist justification to explain the economic success of emerging Asian economies – which, strangely enough, Huntington does not perceive to be a potential ‘threat’ to the Western world.

In the subsequent article, Dr Chandra Muzaffar, Director of Just World Trust, Malaysia, argues along the same line as Abul Kalam but does so primarily within an Asian framework. In fact, according to Muzaffar, “it is the US and Western dominance of the planet, and not the clash of civilizations, which is the root cause of global conflict. By magnifying this so called ‘clash of civilizations, Huntington is trying to divert attention from western dominance and control which has been disastrous for the whole of humankind.” (p104) Muzaffar’s views are one-dimensional because he does not reflect the diversity that characterises the Western world, and therefore his assessment is far from being objective. Thereafter, Chaibong Hahm, an expert on Confucian world-view, looks at the concept of culture as propounded by Huntington and the neo-cons. Perhaps I should remind the readers that ‘culture’ or ‘politics of culture’ is the key concept on which Huntington’s whole thesis is based. Hahm argues that the Confucian understanding of culture is free from racial connotations, unlike the Western understanding and interpretation of the concept. This explains why Huntington’s thesis ends up foreseeing clash and conflict where in fact they do not necessarily exist. So ultimately the problem does not lie with different civilizations but instead in the Western understanding of the concept of culture and cultural interaction, he argues.

In the final article of this book, Paul Hammond, a distinguished American specialist in international affairs, argues that two important tasks lie at the heart of political analysis. One is to identify ‘interests’ and the other is to devise and develop methods and ways whereby such ‘interests’ can be adequately nurtured, managed and contained. He argues that Huntington and the neo-cons identify the various interests (i.e. civilizations) that could lead to conflict but they abysmally fail to pay attention to the second task of political analysis, namely “how to manage conflict and achieve cooperation.” (p127) Ultimately, the message of this book is that, the East and the West or Islamic/Confucian civilizations on the one hand and the Western world on the other are not nor are they likely to get engaged in confrontation with each other in a big way. This is not to say that everything will always be smooth and peaceful. On the contrary, problems and conflicts will arise from time to time but such problems will have to be dealt with fairly and squarely so that injustice, inequality and exploitation is not allowed to be perpetrated. And this can only be achieved through meaningful and constructive debate, discourse and dialogue at individual, regional, cultural and

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civilizational levels. This is a useful book and it should be read to develop a deeper insight into and understanding of current global debates on cultural politics and governance, both in the East and the West.

Professor Salim Rashid should be congratulated for compiling this invaluable collection of articles into a book form. Generally, books published in the sub-continent leave a lot to be desired insofar as the quality of typesetting, format and printing is concerned. But this book is an exception.

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