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Before and Beyond the Clash of Civilizations

MOHAMMAD NAFISSI

Although China and the “Sinic civilization” may pose the greatest challenge to Western hegemony, the Clash thesis would not have achieved its tremendous resonance without the spectre of a perceived Islamic threat. However serious some of the analytical flaws of *The Clash of Civilization*, its author cannot be faulted for hiding the original source of the central concept and title of his influential book. Not only does Huntington refer to Bernard Lewis’s “The Roots of Muslim Rage,”¹ but also quotes its telling conclusion: “It should now be clear that we are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations—that perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both.”² In the years since Lewis wrote these lines and elaborated on them in several best-selling books of his own on Islam and the Middle East, the public perception of the two authors has become increasingly entwined, especially as the twin ideological gurus of the Bush administration’s Middle East policy. In this brief discussion I show that the two authors make diametrically opposite theoretical and political uses of their common understanding of Islam and thereby produce sharply contrasting variants of the clash thesis. Thus understood, each may serve as a platform for the critical evaluation of the other and the development of a more defensible account of Islam in the contemporary world. To clear the ground for such a move, however, we need to first reconsider their shared conception of Islam.

Put in simple comparative terms, for Lewis Islamdom’s fundamental historical problem has been that Islam was not Christianity. To make matters worse, for over a thousand years this original and ultimate failure was preached and indeed experienced as a blessing. But now, Lewis asserts, “it may be that the Muslims, having contracted a Christian illness, will consider a Christian remedy, that is to say, the separation of religion and the state.” This would entail addressing the challenges overcome by Reformation and Enlightenment, albeit “in their own way.” But, Lewis despairs, “there is little sign” that Muslims are so interested.³ He thus considers it more reasonable if all parties faced the fact that the real choice in the Middle East is between a fundamentalism that attributes “all evil to the abandonment of the divine heritage of Islam ... [and] secular democracy, best embodied in the Turkish Republic founded by Kemal Atatürk.”⁴ Lewis does not claim “that the movement nowadays called Fundamentalism is ... the only Islamic tradition” or that “Islam as such” should be blamed for the decline of Muslim states.⁵ He does, however, cancel the significance of the diversity of claimants to Islam by asserting the overriding continuity of hegemonic Islam and the “great institution of caliphate” until the Kemalist revolution.⁶ There is thus, in his view, a clear causal connection between militant fundamentalism’s current ascendancy and its authenticity. Under Islam “the state was the church and church was the state and God was head of both.”⁷ This theocratic legacy and ideal evidently clashes with modernity. Put in Huntington’s pithy formulation: “the underlying problem for the west is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam.”⁸

The clash of the clashists

Beyond this central point, however, Lewis and Huntington part ways. Whereas Huntington’s version of the Clash requires the sustainability of such an “anti-western” trajectory and thus distinguishes “westernization” from “modernization,” for Lewis the two are identical manifestations of a universal civilization whose incompatibility with Islam ensures that Muslim societies fall “further back in the lengthening line of eager and more successful Westernizers, notably in East Asia.”⁹ This reinforces Lewis’s com-

Although Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington are often lumped together as the twin ideological gurus of the Bush administration, they make diametrically opposite theoretical and political uses of their common understanding of Islam. In this contribution Nafissi analyzes these sharply contrasting “clash theses” to critically evaluate the other and to sketch an agenda on the basis of which a more defensible account of Islam in the contemporary world could be based.

mitment to support “freedom seekers” in the Middle East to the point of risking “the hazards of regime change”¹⁰ to complete the Kemalist Westernization. In contrast, for Huntington, Kemalism engenders “torn countries” doomed to failure. Echoing Lewis’s old nemesis, Edward Said and his third worldist associates, Huntington finds that “Western belief in the universality of Western culture suffers three problems: it is false ... immoral, and ... dangerous ... Imperialism

is the necessary logical consequence of universalism.”¹¹ This underpins the “most important” element of his general policy blueprint for Western states: “Western intervention in the affairs of other civilizations is probably the single most dangerous source of instability and potential global conflict.”¹²

It may now be clearer why both of these otherwise opposed agendas are dependent on Islam’s theocratic continuity. The spread of a universalist Islam committed to a “neutral” public space in which it may compete or co-operate with other religious and ideological agendas, including other varieties of Islam, undermines the viability of an international “multicultural” order built around Huntington’s competitive “mono-cultural” civilizations. It would also extend the choices facing the Middle East beyond Lewis’s favoured Kemalism and feared fundamentalism.

The deleted re-formations

In line with the Islamic orthodoxy’s official discourse, Lewis’s seamless theocratic anti-Judeo-Christian-modern account of Islam, ignores at least four major re-formations: first, Mohammad’s resolution of the Judeo-Christian limbo; second, the proto democratic fusion of state-community in the era of the rightly-guided caliphs; third, the rise of dynastic caliphate and separation of the state-community; fourth, the still unfolding and contested reformation triggered by Western modernity.¹³ Together, these intra-Islamic re-formations fuel the current confluences and clashes within Islamdom as much as between “Islam” and the “West.”

Rather than an alternative to Judaism and Christianity, Islam claimed to restore them to their original purity. In this “final” re-formation of the Abrahamic tradition, Mohammad anticipated Protestantism in some areas and went beyond it in others. The fusion of temporal and spiritual authority in Islam’s sacred age realized the millenarian Jewish longing for the age when Israelites were united under a single prophet-king. Judaism, as Weber observed, “never in theory rejected the state and its coercion but, on the contrary, expected in the Messiah their own masterful political ruler.”¹⁴ Mohammad, however, fulfilled this expectation by extending, in line with Christian universalism, Yahweh’s immediate constituency to humanity as a whole. This infusion of mundane politics with sacred energy and mission paralleled Puritanism’s transformation of economic relations. By promising worldly achievement as well as other-worldly salvation, Islam, too, invites Muslims (and non-Muslims) to judge the record of its dominion and set right what may seem wrong and, in the process, change or abandon the actually existing Islam.

The primary authority for reformism necessarily lies in Islam’s sacred age. Lewis underlines the political character of that age, but ignores that it had two distinct, essentially theocratic and democratic phases, each respectively associated with the rule of Mohammad and his first four successors. Dependent on direct revelation and the “seal of prophets,” Mohammad’s theocracy was unique and irreproducible. In contrast, its nascent democratic successor represented a “human” order and was therefore in principle sustainable or reproducible. Ironically, however, the participatory polity of the early caliphs soon became historically unsustainable; first, because it lacked the institutional mechanisms for channelling its own

political vitality and multiple sources of conflict; and, secondly, because it nevertheless succeeded in turning itself into an expansive empire, and no empire has yet been run along democratic lines. If Christianity had to adapt itself to an initially impenetrable empire, Islam was thus compelled to accommodate the empire of its own making and consequently reverted to a new variant of the same historical trajectory.

After the rule of the "rightly guided" caliphs, all the notable branches of Islam were consolidated in response to the question posed by the Umayyad's forcible seizure and transformation of caliphate into a hereditary institution: how to reconcile the separation of the sword and the word with their self-appointed role as the trustees of the sacred era's unity of the sword and the word. The Sharia and the politico-theological agenda that shaped it proved the winning solution following the victory of Ibn Hanbal, the "seal of the jurists," over the rationalist theologians in Islam's third century. By sanctifying and drawing on the prophet's largely fabricated words and deeds (tradition/sunna), the "traditionist" scholars that developed the Sharia created a new divine source on par with the Quran which enabled them to (a) extend and resolve Quran's limited and ambiguous legal content and (b) trump all living claimants to Islam with the legacy of the dead prophet and (c) guarantee their own role as guardians of what became a well-guarded but mummified Islam. Ideologically thus armed, the men of the word in effect struck a "second best" bargain with the wielders of the sword that both recognized the separation of political and religious realms and masked it in line with the legacy of the sacred era. Accordingly, the caliphs, whilst retaining the title of "commander of the faithful," had very little to do with matters of faith, and the Sharia whilst projecting a comprehensive and binding reach, in fact stopped short of regulating the political sphere.

It is the uncritical (or politically driven) adoption of the normative quasi-totalitarian layer of the orthodoxy's complex agenda that allows Lewis to imagine a Sharia anchored in "what we in the West would call constitutional law and political philosophy,"¹⁵ when a glance at any actual version of Sharia confirms that "it said virtually nothing about 'constitutional' or administrative law."¹⁶ The same applies to his similarly plausible but equally misleading claim about the continuity of the caliphate between the rightly-guided Abu Bakr and the Ottoman Abd al-Majid.¹⁷ As Lewis fails to note, the caliphate was punctured by the rise of Umayyads, subsequently marginalized by various Sultanates, and abolished by the Mongols. The Ottomans eventually reclaimed the title, but, as Hamid Enayat explains, only in the late eighteenth century and "in order to equip ... [the Ottoman ruler] with a spiritual authority" commensurate with that of "Empress of Russia as patroness of orthodox Christianity."¹⁸

Islam and modernity

Because generally unacknowledged or unpursued, the historically unavoidable unravelling of Mohammad's political reform of the Abrahamic tradition could not be accompanied by the legitimate rationalization of the patrimonial state or the reactivation of the self-paralyzed religious establishment. Thus Islam's emerging multi-actor society could not be consolidated. This in turn helps explain the transformation of Islam from being at birth "remarkably modern"¹⁹ to entering the modern world belatedly, in greatest need of renewal and pregnant with several latent, theocratic, democratic, and "privatized" reform agendas with no authoritative midwife(s) in place to nurture and deliver an evolved "rightly-guided" polity that could flourish in the new context.

Contrary to its materialist and "anti-orientalist" critics, Lewis's "orientalism" is not to be faulted with asking Muslims to ask themselves "What went wrong?" or with stressing the need for an Islamic reformation and yet despairing of the difficulties of achieving it, thereby turning to the seemingly straighter secular-democratic path. His chief failure as an historian, political advisor, and self-proclaimed democrat lies in his obliterating the cause of democratic reform. He does so, first, by promoting orthodox Islam's normative claim to theocratic continuity and thus buttressing the fundamentalists' case for theocracy, and, secondly, by ignoring the reformist tendencies that have variously questioned this claim. Lewis thus buries or reburies all those Muslims, from the eponymous founders of the orthodox Sunni schools of law and the Shia Imams, to Sayyid Jamal, Abduh, Naini, Iqbal, and their contemporary followers in the democratic or democratically evolving Islamist organizations, that have also asked "what went wrong?" Lewis even avoids the point in his own lifetime when the hegemony of an Islam at once "enlightened" and "authentic" seemed assured in view of the evolutionary renewal of Islam's aborted democratic and rationalist tendencies. Consider the following observation:

"The most remarkable phenomenon of the modern history is ... the enormous rapidity with which the world of Islam is spiritually moving towards the West. There is nothing wrong in this movement, for European culture ... is only a further development of some of the most important phases of the culture of Islam."²⁰

This is Iqbal speaking in 1928. To understand the rising fundamentalist tide that has now submerged his Islamic world, the questions Huntington raises about Kemalism and the imperialist face of Western universalism are essential. However, he does not pursue them beyond the limits set by the clash thesis, and Lewis's theocratic view of Islam. Lewis himself looks the wrong way, not only by writing off the costs of Ataturk's authoritarianism, but also by underestimating his hero's exceptional achievement and assuming that it could be replicated by the likes of an Ahmad Chalabi in Iraq or elsewhere, arriving at the forefront of invading armies. As the only pro-Western Muslim leader to have defeated Western armies, Ataturk achieved the authority to institutionalize secularism to a degree that it was able to survive its major design faults and the Islamist threat. In the process, each side has been compelled to recognize the staying power or merits of the other as well as release their own democratic tendencies.

Similarly, by conveniently adopting the official discourses of Kemalism and Khomeinism, Lewis bypasses both the contributions of Kemalism and imperialism to the rise of Iranian fundamentalism, and the instructive parallels between the evolving legacies of Ataturk and Khomeini. The fundamentalist ascendancy in the revolution that Khomeini made his own would have been inconceivable without the CIA-engineered coup that removed the democratically elected coalition of liberal nationalists and Islamists, and paved the path for the last Shah's suicidal variant of Kemalism. Yet, as a religious example of Huntington's "torn" states, the Islamic republic has survived its own contradictory and crisis-prone foundations in part thanks to its competitive, if highly restricted, electoral politics. Kemalism and Khomeinism thus meet not only as polarized alternatives of their fundamentalist advocates, but also as overlapping trajectories in emerging religious-secular democratic fields. This is not to equate Turkey's evolutionary developments with that of the still theocratically gridlocked Iran or to suggest that the latter will necessarily be reformed without a major upheaval. But it should be clear that Iran's theocracy or Turkey's military-led shadow state, let alone the altogether more regressive autocracies in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, will not be hurried off the historical stage by Huntington's "international multiculturalism" or the more familiar versions of conservative realism now back in vogue following the Iraq disaster.

Under the double banner of "the Middle East is not ready for and Islam is not interested in democracy," the rejuvenated realists are asking the Middle Easterners to choose between anti-western theocracies and pro-western autocracies also reliant on unreformed Islam for some residual legitimacy. The barbaric pluralism on display in Iraq, unleashed as well as reinforced and created by the occupation, however, can only be overcome by a democratic state capable of enforcing the joint Quranic and liberal injunction that "in religion there should be no compulsion." Such states will not arise by Western leaders or Middle Eastern elites (and counter elites) preaching democracy and practising autocracy; but nor will they emerge if all started preaching and practising autocracy. The democratic (re-)fusion of the state and society in the Muslim world would be advanced not only through the evolutionary recovery of Islam's democratic and rationalist heritage in its ongoing reformation, but also by the reform of the US dominated regional/international regime that has altogether retarded the progress of such a project in the name of democracy and rationalism.

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Notes

1. *Atlantic Monthly* 266, no. 3 (1990): 47–60.
2. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996; Free Press: 2002), 213.
3. B. Lewis, "A Historical Overview," in *World Religions and Democracy*, ed. L. Diamond et al. (Baltimore, 2003), 168–79 (178).
4. B. Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (Oxford, 2002), 158–9.
5. B. Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," op. cit., 60; *What Went Wrong?*, op. cit., 156.
6. B. Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (London, 2003), 6, xvi.
7. B. Lewis, *What Went Wrong?*, op. cit., 101.
8. S. Huntington, *Clash*, op. cit., 217.
9. B. Lewis, *What Went Wrong?* op. cit., 152.
10. *Ibid.*, 165.
11. S. Huntington, *Clash*, op. cit., 310, 33; cf. M. Nafissi, "Reframing Orientalism: Weber and Islam," *Economy and Society* 27, no.1 (1998): 97–118 (98–102).
12. S. Huntington, *Clash*, op. cit., 312.
13. See M. Nafissi, "Reformation as a General Ideal Type: a Comparative Exercise," *Max Weber Studies* 6, no. 1 (2006): 69–110.
14. *Economy and Society*, edited by G. Roth and C. Wittich (California, 1978), 594.
15. B. Lewis, *Crisis*, op. cit., 6.
16. A. Hourani, *A History of Arab Peoples* (London, 1991), 161.
17. B. Lewis, *Crisis*, op. cit., 6, xvi.
18. H. Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (London, 1982), 52–3.
19. R. Bellah, "Islamic Traditions and the Problems of Modernisation," *Beyond Belief* (California, 1970), 150.
20. M. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore, 1986), 6.