In the name of civilization: Islam versus the West

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Contents

1. Introduction

Islam and the West. This issue has been debated within the field of international relations as a myth of "Islamic Threat". This traditional approach views Islam as the next real enemy of the post-cold war period. The fate between these two factions is generally seen as volatile. The most well-known work describing this conflict is offered by Harvard professor Samuel Huntington in his work, *The Clash of Civilizations?*[1] His thesis, which claims people's cultural or religious differences to be the primary source of conflict, after the fall of communism, has provoked debates worldwide from which Iranian president, Muhammad Khatami responded with the idea of *Dialogue among Civilizations*.[2]

The "clash" debate seems to have no end. Indeed, it will go on as long as conservatives continue to feel threatened by foreigners. Furthermore, Muslims are now not only prevalent in the east, but in the centre of the occident as well. More important to note, some Westerners *are* Muslims as well, *Islam in the West*.

As a result of this development, clashes cannot only be considered to happen inter-civilizational, but also known to be intra-civilizational. And, culture cannot be seen as the only major defining root of conflict. Gender, generation, economic status, and race, among others, cannot be underestimated. What this work seeks to do is to examine whether conflict in the world is caused by cultural differences, and to determine if Islam actually poses a threat to the west, as Huntington claims.

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[1] See Huntington, Samuel P. 1993. 'The Clash of Civlization?', *Foreign Affairs,* 72(3): 22-49 and his book 2002. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. London: The Free Press.
[2] Khatami Muhammad's speech in 2000. 'Dialogue Among Civilizations'. United Nations, New York.: http://www.unesco.org/dialogue/en/khatami.htm [24.05.2010].

2.   Islam and the West

The main focus of this work is Islam as a religion. Before dissecting the theory of the "clash of civilizations", and considering if Islam even poses a threat to the west, the very wording of "*Islam and the West*" will be first analyzed. The question to be asked here is why is it that a religion, particularly Islam, is in conflict with a geographical area, in this case the west? Andrea Lueg, observing this incompatibility writes that: "it is not Islam and Christianity that are contrasted or the West and the East, but Islam and the West, a religion and a geographical area" (Lueg 1995:21). Yet Bernard Lewis observes "a certain asymmetry" of using a geographical expression for one group and a religion for the other, states that "the term Islam is the counterpart not only of 'Christianity' but also of 'Christendom' – not only of a religion in the narrow Western sense, but of a whole civilization which grew up under the aegis of that religion" (Lewis 1993:4).

In Huntington's work, as we shall see, Islam is defined as the new enemy of the West following communism. This obsession of identifying the "necessary enemy" or to make sense of what will happen in the post-Cold war period can be seen in his work, as well as in Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History?*[3] This idea of the "necessary enemy" is well outlined by Jochen Hippler and Andrea Lueg in their study:

> We no longer have the Soviet Union or Communism to serve as enemies justifying expensive and extensive military apparatus. It was in the mid-1980s at the very latest that the search began for new enemies to justify arms budgets and offensive military policies, at first as part of the Communist threat and then in its place (Hippler/Lueg 1995:4).

This approach of establishing a "necessary enemy" is refuted by Fred Halliday. His claim is that "Western society as a whole and Western capitalism in particular has never 'needed' an enemy in some systemic sense" (Halliday 1996:113).

3.   Post-Cold War paradigm

Samuel Huntington popularized the concept of the clash of civilizations, which was actually introduced by Bernard Lewis before the collapse of the Soviet Union. This concept views Islam as the main consequence of the clash of civilizations. Lewis, who is accused of treating Islam as a monolithic entity by Edward Said, writes in a 1990 article entitled "The Roots of Muslim Rage" published in the *Atlantic Monthly*:

> 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 – perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present and the worldwide expansion of

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[3] Fukayama's works discuss post-Cold war history. See his 1989 article "The End of History" in *The National Interest* and his 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*.

both. It is crucially important that we on our side should not be provoked into an equally historic but also equally irrational reaction against that rival (Lewis: Online edition).

This *Atlantic Monthly* article did not provoke heated debates as when Samuel Huntington popularized Lewis's comments in his 1993 *Foreign Affairs*. Huntington first published his article with a question mark, and three years later expanded it into a book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Similarly, Francis Fukuyama first published an article entitled "The End of History?" in 1989 in the international affairs journal, *The National Interest,* and then expanded it three years later as a book, *The End of History and the Last Man*. They both expanded their articles to give a detailed explanation of their theses. The basis of Fukuyama's thesis is that the world had reached a final evolution—the end of history—with liberal democracy as the final form of government. Both of these Harvard political scientists have worked in the US Foreign Services and both had the titles of their articles include question marks before being dropped in their book titles, attempting to profess "a new phase" in the post-Cold war world.

However, unlike Huntington, who professes the clash especially between West and the remaining regions of the world, Fukuyama is generally optimistic about viewing the world as more harmonious than the liberal democratic way of governing that has become universal:

> What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: That is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government (Fukayama 1992:5).

Fundamentally, what both agree is that the Western way—whether in terms of democracy or civilization—is superior to all other alternatives. But while Fukuyama not only finds Western liberal democracy as the peak of human evolution, he also claims that more and more countries will adopt it as their political system, for which then consequently the global conflict would be over or, in other words, assuming "the war of ideas is at an end" (Huntington 2002:31). Huntington totally disagrees with this conclusion. Ironically, Huntington proclaims: "Halleluja! We study war no more because war is no more", to those with expectations of harmony just because the Berlin wall had come down communist regimes had collapsed as well (Huntington 2002:31). Certainly, Huntington does not see the need of security studies to be disbanded.

Contrary to Fukuyama, while Huntington also believes that the age of ideology has ended, he argues that after the end of the Cold war the new trend will increasingly be a cultural conflict at civilizational divisions. Furthermore, Huntington sees Westerners as arrogant due to their "missionary" behavior which did not cease during slavery and colonization, but continues as a banner of democracy. Their promotion of Western values, such as liberal democracy as universalism is, according to Huntington, naïve, and will only provoke civilizational conflicts (Huntington 2002:183-198). Paradoxically, his recommendations are: for the West to promote unity within Western civilization; to support civilizations which are sympathetic to Western

civilization; and to support institutions that legitimize Western civilization (Huntington 1993:49).

After witnessing how important it is for these three scholars to understand the post-Cold war period, and how Lewis and Huntington emphasize civilizations as future factions of conflict, we shall now examine what exactly "civilization" means before analyzing Huntington's theory of civilizations.

4.1   Civilization

The theory of the clash of civilizations posits a fundamental assumption that civilizations are destined to clash due to incompatibility with each other. The major civilizations are Western, Sinic, Japanese, Latin American, Islamic, Slavic-Orthodox, Hindu, and lastly African.

These civilizations, mostly the Sinic and Islamic, pose a significant challenge to other civilizations and above all, to the West, because they are particularly at odds with Western values. Hence, the probability of for example Islamic civilization, to coalesce against the Western civilization, is enormous. But first, what exactly is civilization? As we can see, geographical terms but especially religions are referred to as "civilizations".

4.2   Civilization: Religion, Culture or both?

Civilization is taken by Huntington as the broadest level of culture and cultural identities (Huntington 2002:20). Therefore, if culture is civilization, what exactly is the definition of culture? On the definition of culture, Hunter quotes Clifford Geertz in his book, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, as meaning "the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, art, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community or population" (Hunter 1998:8). If, in this definition of culture, religion is taken as only one element of civilization, how come then that in Huntington's definition of civilizations, religion occupies a central place?

Religion, as a belief system, is only one element of a civilization. But Huntington takes religion to be the defining element of collective identity. By doing this, other important elements such as ethnicity and language are surpassed. Huntington's underestimation of the significance of ethnic, linguistic, and other distinctions within a particular civilization zone, such as Islam, creates the assumption that all Muslims are part of a vast ethnic group (Hunter 1998: 6-8).

Another question worth asking is, if the Greater Middle East is referred to as Islamic civilization, why is the West not considered to be a Christian civilization? Another region where Christianity is ignored is in Latin America. Instead of this region being referred to as Catholic civilization, it is labeled as Latin American civilization, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority are Catholics. Also, Buddhism as a religion is denied being the basis of a major civilization, while

Japan is the only nation to be separately recognized as representing a civilization. Japanese culture is thus a Japanese civilization. Some countries, we might argue, share two civilizations according to Huntington's map of civilizations. Nigeria for example, is separated into Islamic and African civilizations, while India is separated into Islamic and Hindu civilizations. Do we classify these countries as Islamic or African or Hindu civilizations? Concerning this question of classification, Galymzhan Kirbassov comments:

> The most interesting problem that occurred in classification was to which civilization Israel belongs. The question is significant, as Israel has had many disputes with its neighboring states. Huntington thinks Israel is an Islamic civilization according to the map. It is ironic that Israel is considered [as] an Islamic civilization, first because it has nothing to do with the religion of Islam, and second because such an approach decreases empirical support for Huntington's argument. Although it does not make sense, I classified Israel as Islamic, strictly adhering to the map (Kirbassov: Online).

What we may be certain about is that this monolithic approach of simplifying complex regions to cultural or religious blocks is the only way to show that the clash theory makes sense. In the case of "Islamic civilization", *all* Arabs are considered to be Muslims, whereas in reality, there are about twenty million Christian Arabs and, in addition, the Arab world represents only a small percentage of the world billion Muslim population. But for the purpose of avoiding any misunderstanding, we shall also refer to Islam and the West as civilizational blocks.

5.1   Theory of the clash of civilizations

The "clash of civilizations" is a contentious theory. Generally, this work is an attempt to identify the fundamental source of conflict in the post-Cold war world. Huntington sees different civilizations as the highest rank of cultural identity and thus useful in analyzing the potential for conflict. In the *The Clash of Civilizations?* Huntington writes:

> 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 the battle lines of the future (1993:22).

This hypothesis presents civilizations as *the* factor for future international conflict. By doing this, Huntington downplays ideological and economical tensions. To him, neither social classes between rich and poor nor other possible features level cultural entity (2002:28). This analysis is in contrast to the past theories where tensions between ideology and other determinants such as security or economic advantage were recognized as playing important roles (Hunter 1998:7).

As a consequence, the interaction of other important factors explaining tensions between civilizations is ignored. By purely concentrating on cultures or religions, his critics, such as Lueg and Hippler, consider the clash-of-civilizations thesis to be even racist:

> However, is it that the rationale of his perceived threat is not based on an analysis of the interests or policies of countries or political powers in the Middle East, but on his countradictory formulation of 'civilising' basic categories [sic]. According to Huntington, it is not the clash of interests that leads to conflict; the simple fact is that differences between cultures engender war. In a certain sense you could call his argument 'culturally racist'. The Muslims (or Chinese) are different from us and therefore dangerous. Unlike classic racism, this difference is not genetically but culturally based (Lueg/Hippler 1995: 155-160).

What it is important to note here is that while Lewis and Hunter claim cultural or religious differences as a cause of the clash, Lueg and Hippler, in contrast, identify national interest and foreign policies as a leading impulse of the clash. Also, according to Shireen T. Hunter, "the real cause of conflict between Islam and the West is not civilizational compatibility." (1998:19) Hunter explains her position by pointing out that the relations between the Western countries and all Muslim states would be hostile if this were the case. But this is not the case, since even the West and *Shi'a* Islam had good relations under the Iranian Pahlavi, and has to date close relations with Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan where Islam is in fact the core of the people's collective identity and the main organizer of society and, more important, official state ideology (Hunter 1998:19).

Hunter quotes Graham further: "A civilizational clash is not so much over Jesus Christ, Confucius, or the Prophet Muhammad as it is over the unequal distribution of world power, wealth, and influence" (1998:21). Indeed, it is a conflict between the mighty and powerless, between the rich and the poor and not necessarily what Huntington argues.

The threat to the West is based on challenging its policy. The West acts in accordance to its own interest. What, for example, makes the West befriend the Saudi family—and keep quite with their primitive ruling considering how a woman is valued within their society, such as simple as seen not being capable enough to drive—is this what is meant by "interest". In this situation, despite the Saudis' conflicting values with the West, their relations are not in conflict. Why is this so? Mostly, countries act according to their "national interest" and we know that this "Islamic" country is one of the leading oil producers.

Therefore, on one hand the West may criticize any violations of a country, while on the other hand may praise a violent country depending on their strategy. This double standard, which the critics of Huntington point out, is at best summarized by no one but Huntington himself:

> Non-Westerners also do not hesitate to point to the gaps between Western principle and Western action. Hypocrisy, double standards, and "but not" are the price of universalist pretensions. Democracy is promoted but not if it brings Islamic fundamentalists to power;

nonproliferation is preached for Iran and Iraq but not for Israel; free trade is the elixir of economic growth but not for agriculture; human rights are an issue with China but not with Saudi Arabia; aggression against oil-owning Kuwaitis is massively repulsed but not against non-oil-owning Bosnians. Double standards in practice are the unavoidable price of universal standards of principle (2002:184).

History is well documented. As we have seen, the Muslim oil-producing Kuwait was defended by the United States when they were attacked by Iraq, another Muslim country. If we use the clash theory, we can say this was civilizational as well as intra-civilizational war: the West, in this case the US, against the Islamic civilization, Iraq on one side, while Iraq attacked another country, Kuwait, belonging to the same civilization. This issue gets even more complex when we take into account that the main military force countering Saddam Hussein and helping Kuwaitis, came from both sides of civilizations, the United States and the United Kingdom, and fought shoulder to shoulder with Saudi Arabia and Egyptian forces. From this context, can we say that Islamic civilization joined hands with Western civilization to fight against Islamic civilization? International conflicts are much more complex than to be generally reduced to cultural differences. Indeed, this was not a clash of civilizations, but clearly a clash of interests. Both conflicting parties focused on securing oil fields.

Islam is therefore not the main challenge of the West. In fact, generally speaking, Muslims are too weak to create a great challenge to the West as they are greatly divided along ethnic, sectarian and ideological lines. Muslims are in no way organized as one global *ummah* (Muslim community).

Terrorists do exist but in a small group compared with mainstream Muslims. Furthermore, terrorism is not only a threat to the West, but to humanity as a whole. On September 11th, for example, Muslims were also killed. Therefore, Muslims are also affected and in fact many of them took part in demonstrations to condemn this criminal act, and terrorism as a whole. We might even say that the most affected people are Muslims if we consider the number of killed by suicide bombers in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is why Hunter's counterpoint suggests that though the ideological battles of the twentieth century have been civilizational clashes, it will be more and more within civilizations than between them in the future. The intra-civilizational conflict is the principal conflicts of global politics (Hunter 1998:8-11).

5.2   Inter-civilizational conflict or intra-civilizational conflict?

According to Huntington, conflicts would be among civilizations, and particularly be between Muslims and non-Muslims. To make his argument, Huntington identifies wars between Muslims and non-Muslims for which he concludes that "Islam's borders *are* bloody, and so are its innards" (2002:258). Among all civilizations mentioned, the conflict between Islam and the West, as Edward Said puts it, "get the lion's share" of Huntington's attention (Online version: *Clash of Ignorance*). Whilst identifying "Islam's bloody borders" in *fault line conflicts* (local)

and *core state conflicts* (global), Huntington concludes that the clash of civilizations at both the macro and micro levels to be primarily between the West and the rest, and particularly between Islam and the West (2002:256).

After mainly focusing on "Islam's bloody borders", we are told: "Wherever one looks along the perimeter of Islam, Muslims have problems living peaceably with their neighbors" (2002:256). By identifying wars between Muslims and non-Muslims, proof of Islam as incompatible with Western values such as democracy and modernity is laid and then the probability of peaceful coexistence among Muslims and Westerners is objected. But are those examples mentioned for conflicts between Arabs and Jews in Palestine, Indians and Pakistanis, Sudanese Muslims and Christians, among others, solely or primarily religiously motivated? Indeed, a political factor plays a major role. Thus, this method is unreliable since politically motivated factors are underestimated while religious factors are exaggerated. The role of Islam is in most places used for personal interest and mainly for political interests: either to acquire or maintain, to legitimize or delegitimize power (Hunter 1998:168).

If clashes are primarily along religious lines, then we should not ignore Christianity's uneasiness in the West. For example, homosexuality and premarital sex (and even worse bearing children out of wedlock), are for some Christians intolerable values. Many Westerners also disapprove of abortion because it is against their Christian ethic, for example, as they believe that only God should take away lives. Therefore, in a secular West, Christian Westerners exist, and some issues clashes occur. In this way, not only Muslims, but also practicing Christians, can have difficulties with secular Western values. For this reason, clashes cannot only be prophesied to escalate among civilizations, but clashes *within* civilizations must also be taken into consideration.

6.1   Testing the clash of civilizations theory

This clash-thesis, as stated provoked different responses. The UN adopted a resolution after former Iranian president Mohamed Khatami proposed dialogue as a tool to promote peaceful co-existence among nations in a response to Huntington's thesis. The year 2001 was named as the year of Dialogue among Civilizations.[4] But some scholars, after testing this theory, deny the acquisition of a collision of cultures.

One study, which tests the theory of the clash of civilizations, was conducted by Jonathan Fox (2001:459-472). He examined whether there have been more clashes between Western civilizations in the post-Cold war period. What he found is that views on conflicts depend on perspectives being observed. So, for instance, from an Islamic perspective, the post-Cold war period has not resulted in more conflicts between civilizations. Whereas from a Western

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[4] United Nations Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations 2001: http://www.un.org/Dialogue/. UN's *Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations* is to celebrate intellectual and cultural diversity through interaction among cultures and civilizations. The Group of Eminent Persons was appointed by the Secretary General of the United Nations with the task of working out guidelines for a dialogue among civilizations.

perspective, the theory is supported as clashes between Islamic and Western civilizations are purported to have increased. Thus, according to Fox, Huntington's theory is either credited or discredited depending on the perspective.

Pipa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, on the other hand, confirm Huntington's thesis after a comparative analysis of 75 societies of both Islamic and non-Islamic values and beliefs (Norris/Inglehart 2002). After testing the clash of civilizations thesis, they found that Huntington was right, as culture *does* matter. However, they criticize the thesis for failing to identify the chief cultural fault line between Islamic and Western civilizations. Both scholars maintain that the main concerns of these two civilizations are the issues of gender equality and sexual liberation. Thus, according to them, the cultural line that separates Islam and the West revolves far more centrally around Eros than Demos (2002:3).

Galymzhan Kirbassov is another critic who doubts Huntington's arguments and hypothesis on disputes in the post-Cold War period. His findings, which are supported through quantitative research, contradicts Huntington's thesis, as his result shows that "civilization differences do not cause interstate conflicts" (Kirbassov 2006: Online edition). In his Probit model of data analysis, regarding a total of 620 militarized interstate disputes during the period of 1989-2001, Kirbassov found that there were conflicts between civilizations, but that more conflicts are *within* civilizations. Furthermore, whereas there are conflicts between as well as within civilizations, some of the civilizations did not have any disputes during the examined period. This absence of conflict between some civilizations disqualifies the theory of the 'clash of civilizations' since in spite of the cultural differences, no conflict occurred.

Furthermore, why exclusively identify wars of religion, and exclude cross cultural exchanges? Edward Said in his *The Clash of Ignorance* observes that "history is ignored in the rush to highlight the ludicrously compressed and constricted warfare that the 'clash of civilizations' argues is the reality." This must be a special school of research which permits such biased analysis. Or there might be a hidden agenda.

6.2   If not the 'clash of civilizations', then what?

This is the debate concerning the validity of the "clash of civilizations" theory. Many scholars have criticized Huntington's "clash of civilizations" theory. In response to his critics, Huntington posed this question: "If not civilizations, [then] what?" (Huntington 1993, 72(4):186-194). He challenged these scholars to come up with a better theory to explain the disputes in the post-Cold war period. Among responses to Huntington, Ali Mazrui suggests that African-American sociologist W.E.B. DuBois' prophesy of the "clash of races" as an alternative of the "clash of civilizations" (Mazrui 2002:147-166). A century ago, identifying race as major stimuli on the world scene, W.E.B. DuBois concluded that the central issue would be "the problem of the color line" (Mazrui 2002:148). Could the "clash of races" be an alternative to the "clash of civilizations"?

Mazrui makes three points to support his doubts on the validity of Huntington's thesis. He first questions if in Huntington's theory there is any factual truth. He suggests that since there is also a possibility of conflict arising among state or economic blocs, and not necessarily provoked by cultural differences, making the "clash of civilizations" theory to not be factually true. This he calls a "factual fallacy".

He then goes on to question if Huntington's use of the word "civilization" could be taken as describing "the third stage of racial conflicts in world history." The first round of racism in world affairs, which also led to genocide, happened to native Americans, as well as during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The second round was through colonialism and imperialism. Both of these rounds, which were committed by Europeans, can be seen as periods of racial devastation. Is it then race, or culture, which will be unfolding in the post-Cold war period? This Mazruiana approach shows that there could also be a "conceptual fallacy" in Huntingtonian's case. These two terms, cultural and racial, may share a common meaning.

The last point which he addresses is the question of if this civilization theory suffers from "a temporal fallacy". If we agree on the inter-civilizational clash theory, then according to Mazrui, this thesis suffers from a "temporal fallacy". This is because conflicts between civilizations are not new, as they have existed for centuries: During the Crusades, the trans-Atlantic slave-trade, and European colonization, as some examples. And if this is the case, then Huntington's worst mistake is "assuming that the 'clash of civilizations' lay in the future when it had, in fact, been generating tensions between Europe and the rest of the world for at least four to five hundred years" (Mazrui 2002:149-151). These bloody and deadly aggressions were inspired by a racial paradigm: the white races consider themselves to be at the top, and the rest at the bottom (2002:151). Is Mazrui then right in stating that Cold War of race replaced the Cold War of ideology (2002:148-49)?

7   Conclusions

Depending on the perspective, future conflicts can be seen as being stimulated by ideological, economical, racial, cultural, or even religious differences. W.E.B. DuBois' perspective of the color-line might be influenced by historical forms of prejudices and discrimination, and from experiencing the Black underclass in the USA. Huntington's culture-line, on the other hand, which promotes stereotyping through over-generalizing groups, can be seen as a typical establishment of conservatism. Therefore, it is not meaningful to seek a simple answer to the question to finding the post-Cold war threat. Several considerations should be addressed, as there are many variables. This is why Huntington's critics argue that his thesis suffers from inaccuracy.

And, if the world's conflicts are thought of in terms of civilizations, then two things can be argued. Firstly, the West is the chief aggressor among civilizations. Western civilization, inspired by racism, committed slavery, colonialism and imperialism. These episodes of history are the

bloodiest and deadliest. Secondly, clashes have mostly happened *within* civilizations, rather than *between* them. And, since Islam is no longer explicitly in the East, but is in the heart of the West, crises will normally occur as for Christians.

For this reason, even though some empirical studies invalidate the thesis of the "clash of civilizations", Huntington's controversial notion must not be ignored. More important, facts should be distinguished from fiction. Sound analysis takes into consideration not only the history of crusades and jihads, but also the great period of Euro-Arab exchange and sharing. It is also important to know that Muslims are more heterogeneous than homogeneous, and it is generally wrong to group complex entities to a single unitary whole. Fewer than 15 percent of Muslims are Arabs; therefore it is unwise to associate Islam mainly with the Arab world. Lastly but not least, "dialogue among civilizations" should be launched to avoid the primitive concept of the identity of "us against them".

Improved dialogue between cultures, an end to isolation of those neither with different values nor of different color, and the elimination of the plight to Westernize the entire world, all may help to build mutual understanding. If this happens, clashes will be avoided and co-operation among human beings can start to take place. Indeed, this is *desideratum* of world peace.

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