

THE “ISLAMOPHOBIC” FILM CRISIS: A TEXTBOOK-CASE OF THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

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If you read the wire services dispatches or flip back and forth between 24 hours television news channels, these days, you have a certain feeling of ‘déjà vu’. Just a few years ago we had the affair of the Danish caricatures of Mohammed. Then there was this American preacher who wanted to draw attention to himself by burning copies of the Quran. Today it is an Islamophobic film and some caricatures published in a satirical French weekly which are spreading fever in the Muslim world.

All of this spells a sad posthumous revenge for Samuel Huntington (1927-2008) who, 16 years ago, presented to the world a major essay (translated, incidentally into some forty languages, thereby proving that people were not indifferent to his message): *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Criticised by those who have not read it or who have misread it, *The Clash of Civilizations* developed a central thesis¹ that conflicts and frictions are no longer caused by national, political or economic factors but by a subtle interplay of cultural affinities and divergences.

Huntington declared aloud and with firm voice that there is no ‘universal civilization’. And in doing so he attracted the wrath of the Leftist thinkers who achieved the incredible intellectual feat (here one must even speak of ‘contortionism’) whereby they managed to be at once both universalist and relativistic: ‘no, we are not different, but, yes, all cultures are just as good’. One can obviously debate some of the theories of Professor Huntington, who taught at Harvard for fifty-eight years (beginning his career at the age of 23...). Indeed, was he right to play down the nation or economics as potential sources of conflicts? But his thinking opened a rich and productive field of research.

It is certain that this ‘civilisational’ grid allows us to understand the repetitive crises of the Muslim world every time that an attack is made on their religion. The Western world allows total religious freedom – which, obviously, is not the case with Islam, since absolute freedom includes the right not to have a religion or to change it, things which are forbidden in the Muslim civilization. And ever since Voltaire and the Enlightenment thinkers, this freedom includes the right to criticize religion and even to blaspheme. Hardly a day passes that the Catholic Church or the Pope is not criticized or exposed to caricatures in one or another Western media. To be sure, from time to time, dozens of people come out and demonstrate against a film denigrating Christ (something which is surely more serious than attacking the Prophet, since, for Christians, Jesus participates in the divinity). Judaism is very regularly insulted, often in the crudest fashion, in the press of some Arab or Muslim countries. But no

¹ The book took as its point of departure an article Huntington published in the journal *Foreign Affairs* in 1993: “*The clash of Civilizations*”.

one attacks embassies, assassinates the representatives of a foreign country, burns schools or foment terrorist plots in retaliation.

But just touch the sacred person of the prophet and you will unleash hatred and violence. If that isn't a clear demonstration of the differences existing between civilizations and of the conflicts which can result from them, then the words no longer have any meaning.

To be sure, many Muslims are staying calm and are reacting in an intelligent manner. So you don't like a film? Just don't watch it! Do you feel insulted by *Charlie Hebdo*? Don't buy it! Unfortunately this does not prevent extremists from agitating, recruiting and moving into action in the name of Islamic values and the Quran. None of them seem to take the time to consider a simple question. What does more harm to the Muslim religion and to its image: an idiotic short film and some caricatures of questionable taste or the hideous spectacle of women on whom acid has been thrown or who have been stoned, of hostages whose throats have been slit before a camera in the name of Allah, of churches torched in Egypt, of Shiites massacred in Iraq or of an ambassador assassinated?

Thus, Islam must reform itself. It must accept, as we do, liberty of religion, attacks and even insults. That is the price to pay to enter the modern era.

And insofar as this is not done, we must stick to our values. Values among which freedom of expression and of religion (or 'irreligion') are the non-negotiable basic platform. And if our influence on the Arab-Muslim world will be, in this way, necessarily more limited, it is still vital at least not to allow the importation among us of hatred and of a conflict that we do not want. We must proclaim loudly and clearly that freedom, the right to criticise and to blaspheme is, for us, as "sacred" as the image of the prophet is for Muslims.

To do this, we have a simple and magnificent text which must inspire the world: the First Amendment to the American Constitution, adopted in 1791 (!): *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances*'.

This text, all by itself, defines a 'difference of civilization'.

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