

Twenty-five years ago, an essay entitled “The Clash of Civilizations?” was published. Was its thesis simplistic and arbitrary—or prophetic?

Whose Civilization? Which Clash?

Daniel McCarthy

When Samuel Huntington died on Christmas Eve ten years ago, at the age of eighty-one, his reputation was mixed. He was a giant in his field of political science and practically an institution unto himself at Harvard University, where he had taught for more than four decades—nearly six, in fact, but for a few years at Columbia University and serving in the Carter administration. Yet some of his peers thought he had veered onto dangerous terrain with his last major works, *The Clash of Civilizations* and *Who Are We?*, two books on the place of Western and American identity in a world of rival, incommensurable cultures. Whatever vogue Huntington had acquired shortly after the 9/11 attacks for his seeming prescience about the inter-civilizational character of wars in the twenty-first century had dissipated by 2008. And with Huntington on the side of restricting immigration into the U.S. and calling in *Who Are We?* for the assimilation of newcomers into the dominant—by default “Anglo”—American culture, he had become, as far as liberals were concerned, an outright reactionary.

Daniel McCarthy is editor of *Modern Age*.

Today he again looks like a prophet. Immigration has become the most contentious political question in America and western Europe alike. Popular movements not only in the West but also in India, Israel, Latin America, and the Islamic world are now urgently asking who “we” are within the context of their own communities, and their answers draw lines of conflict in their internal politics as well as international relations. A decade after his death, we are living in the world that Samuel Huntington foretold.

“The Clash of Civilizations?”—with a question mark, as the title originally appeared, though Huntington had no discernable doubts about this thesis—is especially worth reexamining in light of all that has happened since it first appeared as an essay in *Foreign Affairs* twenty-five years ago. The essay and the book that later grew from it are valuable today not for what they argue in every particular but for the style of thought they represent. To speak of “civilizations” is deeply unfashionable, even more so now than it was when Huntington wrote in 1993. Yet these large, hazily defined cultural blocs are indispensable for understanding more than just the flash points of conflict over the past quarter century: they also tell us almost everything about how those conflicts have played out and why America’s global strategy of liberal hegemony seems to have failed. Our country’s security and prosperity, and indeed the well-being of the West as a whole, depend on taking Huntington’s lessons to heart—even if that means applying his framework in new ways.

Huntington did not envision the clash of civilizations as a new Cold War, in which even without direct military confrontation two or more blocs would vie for world supremacy. He was instead skeptical about the American-led West’s own universalist aspirations: its leaders’ desire to transform other civilizations into copies of theirs, by

force if necessary. Their attempts would provoke resentment and retaliation—which is arguably just what we have seen, in the form of terrorism and insurgency from the Islamic world and Russian interference in Western elections, among other things. But Western overreach would be only one source of the many kinds of clashes to break out in the twenty-first century, Huntington argued. Anywhere rival civilizations abutted each other, including within “torn countries” that did not fully belong to one bloc or another, conflict could erupt.

We might, twenty-five years on, begin to see civilizational conflicts as having something more like the Cold War’s character as a struggle for the world than Huntington did. A scorecard of sorts can even be compiled to consider the long-term prospects of the major civilizations. But first a few points about Huntington’s original arguments must be made. His critics have sometimes claimed that his work has in fact caused the very sorts of conflicts he predicted. They blame him for instilling in American elites an outlook of inevitable war between the West and other civilizations, especially Islam. This “anti-imperialist” critique of Huntington has it that there is no clash of civilizations, only resistance of Western domination.

To have a semblance of truth, this critique would have to be expanded to say that resistance to empires of all kinds, not just Western power, is the source of clashes, rather than civilizational differences. The present Chinese campaign against Uyghur Muslims, to give one example, obviously has nothing to do with the West. But in any event, empires and civilizational core states are very much part of Huntington’s framework. It’s no refutation of him to say that states and their aggressions still matter.

As for the notion that Huntington helped to create the kinds of conflicts that he described, if Western policymakers had read him attentively, instead of taking “the clash



Reactionary or visionary? Samuel P. Huntington launched a decades-long debate about the future of the West

of civilizations” as a crude generality, they would have found that he makes the case for a defensive grand strategy. Huntington wanted U.S. leaders to restrain themselves. “In the politics of civilizations, the peoples and governments of non-Western civilizations no longer remain the objects of history as targets of Western colonialism but join the West as movers and shapers of history,” he wrote. As a result,

the West will increasingly have to accommodate these non-Western modern civilizations...whose values and interests differ significantly from those of the West. This will require the West to maintain the economic and military power necessary to protect its interests in relation to these civilizations. It will also, however, require the West to develop a more profound understanding of the basic religious and philosophical assumptions underlying other civilizations and the ways in which people in those civilizations see their interests.

Some of Huntington’s particular observations about the West’s attitudes toward non-Western powers have proved strikingly accurate in retrospect. Consider his interpretation of the politics of nonproliferation:

During the Cold War, the primary purpose of arms control was to establish a stable military balance between the United States and its allies and the Soviet Union and its allies. In the post-Cold War world, the primary objective of arms control is to prevent the development by non-Western societies of military capability that could threaten Western interests. The West attempts to do this through international agreements, economic pressure and controls on the transfer of arms and weapons technologies.

In 1993 it was already clear to Huntington that “the conflict between the West and the Confucian-Islamic states”—such as China, North Korea, Iraq, and Iran—would focus “largely, although not exclusively, on nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, ballistic

missiles and other sophisticated means for delivering them, and the guidance, intelligence and other electronic capabilities for achieving that goal.” While the West would insist upon “nonproliferation as a universal norm,” nation-states of non-Western civilizations would see things otherwise: in terms of their independence and freedom from Western impositions.

Taking conflicts like the 1990s bloodshed between Serbs, Croats, and Muslims in the Balkans together with tensions between states over proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and with terrorism very much at the forefront of the argument as well, Huntington wrote of the clash of civilizations occurring “at two levels. At the micro-level, adjacent groups along the fault lines between civilizations struggle, often violently, over the control of territory and each other. At the macro-level, states from different civilizations compete for relative military and economic power, struggle over the control of international institutions and third parties, and competitively promote their particular and religious values.”

The major civilizations in Huntington’s account are a heterogeneous bundle. He names eight: Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Western, Orthodox, Hindu, African, and Latin American. Civilizations are the largest meaningful groupings of human beings, beyond which lies only the abstraction of humanity in general. In practice, civilizations are marked out by language, religion, and other qualities that distinguish them from their neighbors. “The people of different civilizations,” Huntington writes, “have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy.”

Certain objections may spring readily

to mind. Latin America is overwhelmingly Catholic and Protestant, and Romance languages predominate. Why then isn’t Latin America part of the West? And why is Japan distinguished from the rest of East Asia, which is already an enormously diverse region? The first question is more easily answered than the second. In terms of its historical economic and political evolution, Latin America is distinct from the “Anglo” countries and western Europe, even if it is part of their larger religious and linguistic communities. Perhaps Latin America will one day merge with the advanced West—Huntington doesn’t provide any grounds to rule out the possibility. Nevertheless, as of today there are few places of a hundred miles’ radius in Latin America that one could mistake for a part of Europe or the United States.

Japan, on the other hand, probably does belong with the rest of East Asia, even by Huntington’s own lights. If France and Germany are both “the West,” there is no reason Japan and China (along with the other states Huntington calls “Confucian”) cannot be considered part of the same civilization. The ties of language, history, and religion between Japan and the rest of the Far East are as old and as strong as the ties between leading states within other civilizations.

There are problems with the other civilizational designations as well, to various extents. But it is not necessary to resolve them in order to find value in Huntington’s work. Civilizations as a concept may be unscientific, yet not everything that is unscientific is false. An unscientific framework is exactly what is needed when dealing with irregular, unscientific things such as historical human groupings. Huntington thought of himself as a social scientist through and through, and the critics are half-right when they say that his later books are less than completely scientific. Yet what makes Huntington a bad social scientist in this sense makes him

a better political thinker. He understands persistent human elements that are not easily accounted for by fixed criteria.

Japan's peculiar status in Huntington's original schematic can be attributed to a reasonable historical judgment in the context of 1993: at the time, Japan's worldwide economic and cultural significance was second only to that of the West, with China's rise as a global power still years away. Today, when the balance between China and Japan tilts toward the former, there is less reason to place Japan in its own category. We might therefore reduce Huntington's eight civilizations to seven, and although Japan could be included under a broad "Confucian" rubric, the civilization might be just as well designated in geographic terms as "East Asian." With this adjustment, the chief civilizational blocs in the world today are Western, East Asian, Latin American, African, Islamic, Hindu, and Orthodox—the last of those referring to Russia and the primarily Orthodox Christian countries of the Slavic world.

Not every nation fits neatly into these boxes: Israel arguably stands as a unique Jewish civilization-state, while numerous states are "torn countries" divided between civilizations. Ukraine is a prime example: although Huntington was impressed by the peaceful separation of Ukraine from the Russian-dominated USSR in 1991, he noted the potential for conflict along the civilizational line "separating the more Catholic western Ukraine from Orthodox eastern Ukraine." Looking at the historic conflicts that have occurred wherever Western, Orthodox, and Islamic civilizations have met, Huntington wrote that now "the Velvet Curtain of culture has replaced the Iron Curtain of ideology as the most significant dividing line in Europe."

At least one of Huntington's torn countries has moved decisively back to its civilizational roots. In 1993, Turkey still had enough of a Western orientation to be considered less than fully part of the Islamic

bloc. Huntington wondered whether Turkey might reject both the West and the Islamic world to instead build a sphere of influence among the Turkic peoples of Central Asia. That has not happened: instead, Turkey has reasserted its Islamic identity and its place in Middle East politics. If Turkey is not brought low by its present financial straits, the long-term legacy of President Erdogan's blend of nationalism and Islam may be to put Turkey into position to claim leadership of the Islamic world. Such a claim would not, of course, go uncontested by Saudi Arabia or Iran, among others. Huntington noted in the 1996 *Clash of Civilizations* book that Turkey "would have to reject Ataturk's legacy more thoroughly than Russia has rejected Lenin's" in order to lead the Islamic powers. "It would take a leader of Ataturk's caliber and one who combined religious and political legitimacy to remake Turkey from a torn country into a core state." Erdogan has aspired to be just such a figure.

The "core state" is a concept that figures prominently in the book. The United States, Russia, India, and China are today the core states of Western, Orthodox, Hindu, and East Asian civilizations respectively. There are no core states—paramount military, economic, and cultural powers that exercise leadership—in Islamic, Latin American, or African civilization, though there are some states that are clearly more powerful than others. A reckoning of how each civilization stands in competition with the rest of the world today has to take account of the presence or absence of a core state. They are, in effect, imperial powers, able to coordinate the other states within their blocs and wage defensive or offensive wars with other great powers and blocs.

A world in which civilizations respect one another's differences and boundaries—including the borders of their component states—might be ideal from the point of

view of peace. But civilizations rarely act as self-contained units: they tend to expand or contract, militarily, demographically, culturally, economically, or otherwise. And civilizations that are large and powerful enough, or driven by a universalistic creed, may try to establish an entire world order. In the early years after the Cold War, the liberal and democratic West dreamed of just such an order—an end to history for all of humanity. Huntington was a skeptic, and in this, as in so many things, he was wise.

There are at present two civilizations that could aspire to become the basis of a world order: East Asia and the West. China's strategy for global hegemony, however, is rather different from the one lately pursued by the United States. The U.S. and the West as a whole were driven by a religious impulse—the spirit of a liberalism descended from Christianity—to proselytize, spreading the gospel of human rights and liberal democracy to all the world, confident in the belief that every person on the planet at heart aspired to vote in a two-party system and enjoy the American consumer way of life, in all its rich diversity of identities to try out. There was money to be made and power to be wielded in spreading Western values and habits, naturally enough. But if America built a liberal empire, it was an empire unlike most of those known to history: the U.S. spent enormous sums on nation building among allies and defeated enemies alike, from World War II through to the ongoing occupation of Afghanistan. Americans did most of their war fighting, too—unlike, say, the Romans of old, who came to rely on the auxiliaries contributed by allied and subject peoples.

Western civilization's attempt at building a universal order was ideological as well as material, and strongly outward directed. China, by contrast, as the paramount power of East Asia, might build a world order without trying to make anyone else Chinese. (Except, perhaps, for the luckless Tibetans

and Uyghurs—and even then, the Chinese seem less interested in conversion than in colonization and subordination.) Civilization is in some respects a better lens through which to view the rise of China than state power is. The People's Republic of China has many internal political, regional, and economic fault lines, and while the Chinese state seems mighty and durable, it is not absolutely unshakeable from within. But even if China as a state should undergo an upheaval like the fall of communism in Russia—or the toppling of the *ancien régime* in France—China as a civilizational core will continue to grow greater. Most of the nearly 1.4 billion Chinese will eventually attain a level of prosperity close to (if not beyond) what the West considers middle class. As that happens, China and East Asia will eclipse the West as the world's richest civilization and the center of world economic activity.

For decades, China has followed a classic model of national economic development, favoring domestic industry and acquiring by any means possible the trade secrets of more advanced manufacturing countries. As Chinese wages have risen, some of China's neighbors—Vietnam, for example—have undercut its labor prices. But in the long run, China does not aim to be a low-wage producer. It will be an industrial titan, and also, in time, the world's largest consumer market. With that economic position—as maker and buyer of the most finished goods—will come military power and global influence. China as a civilization was for centuries a world unto itself, and in the twenty-first century that is what China may become again: only this time, China will not only be larger, stronger, and wealthier than any nearby state; it will also be larger, stronger, and wealthier than any other civilization. It will have become the center of gravity, in human terms, for the entire world, without having to fire a shot.

If the future looks dazzlingly bright for East Asia, it appears cloudy for other civilizations. India's population is on course to exceed China's within a few years, and already India has a higher rate of economic growth. But India has a long way to go to catch up with China in terms of absolute wealth: Indian per capita GDP is barely more than one-fifth of China's. Hindu civilization, with India as its core state, also faces an external constraint more significant than those that apply to China, in the form of the threat from Pakistan. India, like China, is almost a world unto itself. But unlike China, whose world of economic and cultural power can plausibly mean most of the planet, India's world is its own subcontinent.

Huntington correctly foresaw India's re-embrace of its Hindu civilizational roots. That India would take this turn was far from obvious to other analysts in the early 1990s. Fouad Ajami, for one, rejected Huntington's prediction and insisted that India would remain on a path of secularism and convergence with the West. ("India will not become a Hindu state," he wrote in *Foreign Affairs*. "The inheritance of Indian secularism will hold.") Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on the contrary, India has become a self-confidently as well as a self-consciously Hindu state—with, to be sure, a degree of resistance from the country's many minorities.

Growth is the future of African civilization, as it is for India. But where population growth will lead in Africa's case is more uncertain. Nigeria, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo will be among the ten most populous countries in the world by 2050. But if economic growth and political order do not keep pace with the population boom, a mass exodus can be expected. Much of Africa is presently a battleground between Islam and Christianity, and the religious balance of power is unpredictable. What is certain is that it will have tremendous repercussions for Europe and the Arab

world—presently dominant economic and cultural powers that may find themselves in a radically new position when most of their coreligionists are Africans and on the move. There are simply too many possibilities to predict how Africa's growth and change will affect the world, but this is a question toward which both Islam and the West will increasingly have to turn their attention.

The Islamic world is still exhibit A for the clash of civilizations. Islam, as Huntington observed, has bloody borders. And well beyond its borders, Islamist extremists have spread violence: this was already the case when Huntington published "The Clash of Civilizations?"—the essay appeared the same year as the terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center masterminded by Ramzi Yousef. That was also the year Mir Aimal Kasi killed two CIA employees in Langley, Virginia. In the quarter century since then, terrorist attacks and atrocities perpetrated by al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and individuals inspired by such groups have been carried out in the United States, Europe, Africa, and much of the Islamic world itself. The West has responded not simply by retaliating against the terror groups, however, but also by launching regime-change and nation-building campaigns in places like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya.

Islam is unusual as a civilization, with universal aspirations but no core state at present. The absence of a core state contributes to the Islamic world's tendency to generate terrorism and insurgencies. One function of a core state is to vindicate the interests of its civilization before other great powers, whether through war or hardball negotiation. Another function of a core state is to organize violence and suppress wildcat terrorists. Islam has had core states before, from the early Caliphate to the Ottoman Empire. Today several states vie for primacy in the Islamic world—Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and to some extent Pakistan (which, however, is more preoccupied with

India than with leading the Islamic world), while groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State also present themselves as if they were core institutions of their civilizations. States, however, are increasingly coming into direct conflict, and the future of clashes within Islamic civilization—perhaps between Islam and other civilizations as well—looks to lie not with terrorists but with governments. Islamist forces have little hope of defeating anyone else or settling their differences with one another until a core state comes into being—which may not occur for decades, if ever.

Orthodox civilization is tough but largely defensive in orientation, a characterization that may seem surprising in light of Russia's activities in Ukraine, Syria, and Western elections. But Orthodox civilization has neither the material resources that make East Asian civilization a world power nor the material and moral urge to expand everywhere that characterizes the West. Russia is a danger to those states on its periphery and a source of mischief to the West. Yet Russia does not have the means or the morale to transform the world. What is most important about Orthodox civilization in the contest of world powers is how it aligns with other blocs. If it is hostile to the West, it helps hasten the rise of a post-Western world order, most likely one dominated by East Asia. On the other hand, if Orthodox civilization were at ease with the West, relatively speaking, it could be a valuable ally in clashes with other civilizations. In the case of the West and Orthodox civilization, however, their geographic proximity and shared roots in Christianity and classical civilization may only serve to highlight their differences. Orthodox civilization is profoundly non-Western and resistant to Westernization.

Latin America, on the other hand, may over time be open to Westernization—yet there is also the risk that the West will become more like Latin America. The risk here is not demo-

graphic but political and economic: Latin America is what Western civilization looks like when it doesn't work, when economic disparities are too wide and political and civic institutions fail. The extremes of political left and right that routinely appear in Latin America should prompt Americans and Europeans to reflect on just how moderate their own supposed "polarization" is. Mexico, Central America, and South America have great potentialities, yet their institutions have not been able to fulfill them. Western institutions have by contrast been highly successful—but there is no guarantee that such will always be the case.

Finally, there is the West. What does the future hold for the English-speaking peoples and western Europe? Will Huntington's pleas for strengthening our own civilization rather than attempting to remake others' be heeded? They have not been so far. Instead, for the past twenty-five years, Western leaders have behaved as if the end of the Cold War meant that the West was now the world, with people everywhere eager to become just like Americans and Europeans, thus rendering borders, sovereignty, and national economies obsolete. Even as voters in the United States, Britain, and Europe soured on transnational liberalism after the Iraq War and the Great Recession—with Britain voting for Brexit, the U.S. electing Donald Trump, and populist parties making gains on the Continent—business, cultural, and political elites clung to the dreams of the 1990s.

At both the elite and the popular level, however, the clash of civilizations has made itself felt. American elites fear Orthodox civilization, not only in the form of Russian power but also in the moral threat that a more authoritarian and culturally traditionalist part of Christendom represents. Among the public, Islam and immigration from Latin America are sources of anxiety

for voters on the right. On the left, Western civilization itself is often cast as the enemy, with a new, post-Western America as the ideal to be pursued. In Europe, a similar but even more intense crisis of civilizational direction is playing out, as the respective places of Christianity and Islam, hopes of restoring historic national identity and fears of nationalist excesses, and related controversies reshape politics.

There are two possible paths for the future of the West, and the time to decide between them is now. The first path leads to division and transformation, as the United States and western Europe drift apart culturally and strategically and are trivialized economically by the rising power of East Asia. In this scenario, Europe's future is defined by its proximity to the Islamic world and a growing Africa. Though Muslim populations in Europe might peak at perhaps 20 percent of the populace, the cultural influence of Islam promises to exceed its number of adherents. The intensity differential between Muslims and Christians, or Muslims and liberals, would be as important as the numbers. If Islam succeeds in Africa as well, then a new greater Islamic civilization would be born—possibly even with Europe as its eventual core state. But it is also possible that a larger Islamic cultural presence in Europe will trigger a Christian revival in response. And if Christianity prevails over Islam in the contest for African adherents, other possibilities arise, ranging from a new Afro-European Christendom to a Europe violently riven by clashes between Islam, Christianity, liberalism, and illiberalism.

Whatever the case, a Europe separated from the United States would be a sub-civilization whose destiny would be determined by more forceful or populous civilizations nearby. The United States without Europe, meanwhile, may become as economically divided and institutionally weak as much of Latin America has historically

been, if the U.S. continues to pursue cultural liberalism and economic globalism in a world in which East Asia is the dominant producer and consumer. Alternatively, however, the U.S. could turn to its past as a “shining city on a hill,” becoming as independent and self-supporting as possible, interacting with the rest of the world not through military power and moral proselytizing (the imperial liberal model) or through economic dependence (the post-imperial liberal model), but through moral example. American elites act as though the American public could not possibly give up world-spanning military power or cheap consumer goods, even at the cost of domestic manufacturing. But Americans of old denied themselves all such worldly comforts to come to a hazardous new world, and the “isolationist” streak still runs deep. This would not have to be taken to an extreme: America could become something like today's Japan, only on a continental scale, with a strong preference for citizens' interests and domestic industry and relatively little in the way of offensive military capability. (Except for a top-tier nuclear arsenal in America's case.)

But what about a Western civilization that did not split in two—can the civilization that we know be saved here and in Europe? Having failed to heed Huntington's counsel about the clash of civilizations and who we are, Western leaders have spent two and a half decades squandering the moral, economic, and military strength of their own civilization while failing to plant liberal democracy successfully in non-Western soil. More of this, as the world becomes more competitive and clashes between civilizations grow more serious, will lead to ruin. The only salvation for the West, in worldly terms, is to abandon the follies that Huntington warned against. Instead of a civilization oriented toward an unattainable world order, the West must again become a civilization oriented toward the nation-state—a political form the West perfected. The United States, the wider

“Anglosphere,” and western Europe together have enough wealth and a wide enough geographic distribution of strength to be a pivotal power in the long-term clash of civilizations, even in a world in which economic activity and demographic growth are centered in the east and south.

This West would be more like the British Empire of the nineteenth century than the American empire at the end of the twentieth, operating in terms of “splendid isolation” within its own vast sphere and regarding with jealousy the rise of other great powers.

Such jealousy need not lead to war: imperial Britain long played the role of offshore balancer in Europe, and the united West can be the balancer of civilizations, working with others as needed to check and constrain the rise of a civilizational hegemon. This is the closest the world might ever come to an equilibrium of civilizations and states—a larger application of the old Augsburg formula of *cuius regio, eius religio*. That would not be the end of the clash of civilizations, but it would provide a basis for greater security and respect. 

Halloween

Amit Majmudar

We aren't monsters, we're just masks
With bite-sized kids inside.
The licorice-black new moon tonight
Has got something to hide.

The lights are off in all the houses
Up and down this street.
The gumdrop has a needle gouge
And isn't safe to eat.

The monster wears a judge's robe,
The monster wears a badge,
The monster wears a suit and gathers
Kids into his bag.

We stumble singly up the steps,
We rap on the darkened door
And drop like candy from a hand
Into the opened floor.

Amit Majmudar's latest book is *Godsong: A Verse Translation of the Bhagavad-Gita, with Commentary* (Knopf, 2018). His forthcoming books are *Soar: A Novel* (Penguin India, 2019) and *Kill List: Poems* (Knopf, 2020).