

**Beyond the Clash of Civilizations
Reimagining the World in the Post-Huntington, Post-George W. Bush Era**

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Abstract

Professor Dr. Samuel Huntington, Guru Besar Jurusan Permerintahan Universitas Harvard, meninggal dunia dengan tenang December 24, 2008. Mungkin sajarana ilmi politik yang terkenal di abad 20, dia menulis 17 buku dan lebih dari 90 makalah. Anak primadona ini lulus dari Yale kalau masih sangat mudah, umurnya hanya 18, dan mulai mengajar di universitas “saudara” Harvard Tahun 1949, umurnya hanya 22. Dia terus menajar di universitas itu sampai Tahun 2007. Di juga bekerja di Gedung Putih sebagai anggota staf pribadi Presiden Johnson dan Carter. Dalam tulisan semua dia megambarkan “big picture” atau “grand narrative.” Dalam hal ini ada hubungan antara tulisiaya orangAS ini, dan sejarahwan Ingris Arnold Toynbee dan Winston Churchill. Mereka semua mencari sebabnya mudah dibelakan jalan sejarah manusia dan negara negara , khususnya dalam international relations. Prinsip yang paling penting dalam pikiran dan tulisan Huntington, itu, “cultural nationalism” atau nasionalisme kebudayaan. Menurut pelawan dan pendukung dia pasti seorang “mono-culturalist.” Dari pihak ini, semangat nasionalisme atau “national identity” asal dari prinsip kebudayaan atau agama yang tertentu. Untuk berhasil baik satu negara harus ikut kebudayaan tertentu ini dan tidak bisa memcampurkan kebudayaan nasional dengan kebudayaan lain. Kalau aya tidak salah, tesis in juga berasla dari pikiran sosialogy Max Weber. Menurut ilmuwan besar ini, adalah hubungan tetap antara prinsip dasar satu agama Mislanya, menurut dia, multiculturalism AS, bukan ide baik, dan imigrasi dari negara America Selatan, ada kebahayaan karena warga America baru ini punya kebudayaan “Latin” yang berbeda dari kebudayaan ‘Protestant’ America asli (seperti dia sendiri). Menurut dia, konflik “Perang Dingin” adalah konflik luar biasa karena lantaran perbedaan teori ekonomi. Professor Huntington beranggapan dalam dunia pasca perang dinging sumber konflik international, perdedaan kebudayaan. Dia tidak pernah menjelaskan hubungan antara pikiranya tentang policy dalam dan diluar negeri, tapi saya kira itu jelas, dua duanya mulai dengan mono-culturalism dan cultural chauvinism.

Professor Samuel Huntington died at the age of 81 on December 24th 2008. Huntington was Professor of Government at Harvard University and will be remembered as being among the most influential American Political Scientists of the twentieth century. He is best known for his influential and highly controversial “Clash of Civilizations” thesis.

No matter, what one’s opinion of Huntington’s analysis of world events and the contemporary world system, it is necessary to concede that he was a person of tremendous intellect. He was the author of 17 books and more than 90 academic articles. He also served as advisor to Presidents Johnson and Carter. He was something of a prodigy. He graduated from Yale University in New Haven Connecticut, one of the finest in the United States, at the age of 18. He began his teaching

career at Harvard, in 1949 at the age of only 22 and soon became one of the most distinguished members of this most distinguished faculty.

In many of his writings Huntington constructed “grand narratives” or “big pictures” through which he sought to explain the broad scope of history in terms of a small number of simple, but powerful ideas. In this respect he was similar to social theorists of an earlier age, including the British historian Arnold Toynbee and Winston Churchill and curiously the Muslim historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldun. He was far less concerned with historical detail and strangely, in a discipline which prides itself on methodological rigor and its ability to sort through mountains of qualitative data in search of models with high levels of statistical significance, with “the numbers.” He was disdainful of his critics, of whom there were many; challenging them to offer alternative models and ignoring them when they did.

Even the greatest of intellects are the products of, or at least constrained by the social and historical contexts in which they are located. There are, to be certain, “singularities” in human thought, just as there are in the physical universe, which redefine discourse and history. Weber calls them “prophets.” Huntington was not among them. Born in 1927 he seems to have been unable to escape the two catastrophes that marked his youth: the Great Depression and the Second World War. He appears to have understood history as a secularized version of the struggle between good and evil that is commonplace in Protestant Christian discourse. He was probably directly influenced by the German sociologist Max Weber and the German-American Protestant Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. From Weber, Huntington took the idea that the character of nations and the course of history are shaped by basic cultural and religious principles. He was inclined to see the post-World War II Cold War era as an historical aberration and an exception to the general rule that it is culture and not economics which is the dominant force in world history. In this respect, he was profoundly anti-Marxists at a time when the right, as well as the left shared the Marxist assumption that history and politics are driven by economics. He understood the post-Cold War era as one in which the “natural order of things” in which conflict and cooperation are framed, if not determined, by culture and religion has returned. Huntington was most definitely not a utopian thinker. He shared Niebuhr’s pessimism about the ability of individuals to construct anything resembling a perfect society.

These two ideas shaped Huntington’s visions of the world and its’ the nations and “civilizations” of which it is composed. He was clearly a “mono-culturalist” and regarded ethnic and cultural pluralism as a destructive forces that somehow diminishes the ability of nations to realize their potential. This was very apparent in his last book in which he took a very strong anti-immigration stance, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the US is, more than most others, a nation of immigrants and that its emergence as a world power in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was due, in large measure, to its ability to transcend ethnic and religious differences. It is perhaps significant that the particular wave of immigration he decries in from Latin America, which, in *The Clash of Civilizations* he defines as an “other” civilization.

There was nothing new about the “Clash of Civilizations” thesis, nor was it unique to the West. This type of cultural chauvinism, which defines inter-national and inter-cultural relations as an “us against the rest” zero sum game has been known for centuries. The Roman and Chinese Empires defined themselves as “civilized” and others as “barbarians.” Prior to the Second World War, Japan defined China and Chinese as being somewhat less than human. German Nazis defined their conquests and atrocities in similar terms. Huntington was not that crude, and can not be described as a racist, but he did see the world as being fundamentally divided along cultural and religious lines across which capacity for understanding and mutuality is limited. It is important to keep in mind the fact that this was an *assumption*. He did not present evidence for this position. It was rather the starting point for his analysis of world affairs.

Huntington was not; however, an interventionist, nor like that other giant of US strategic thought Woodrow Wilson, was he inclined to believe in global campaigns to “make the world safe for democracy.” He appears to have supported the view that some civilizations, not ably those of Europe and North America are particularly suited for the growth of democracy, while most, if not all others, are not. His thesis that democratic transitions show proceed slowly and that blatantly racist regimes such as apartheid South Africa should be tolerated is illustrative of the role of Niebuhr’s theological pessimism on Huntington’s thought. Huntington was clearly not an isolationist. That is hardly possible in today’s globalized economy, but he did not seek to actively engage or transform the world. He does not, however, seem to have endorsed the ideology of western cultural supremacy that was the basis of US foreign policy during the Bush administration.

This is where Huntington differs most from George W. Bush and his neo-conservative allies. Bush and the neo-conservatives share Huntington’s basic world view. Theirs is a “the west against the rest” zero sum game view of global politics. Bush, like Wilson, sought to remake the world in the west’s and especially America’s image. We all know that Bush defined the world in starkly simplistic *theological* terms. “Others” were “with us” or “against us” and those who were against “us” were held to be on the side of the “axis of evil.” Unlike Huntington he believed that the world could be transformed and made, in Woodrow Wilson’s terms “safe for democracy” by “shock and awe” which are code words for massive military force.

As a social scientist, is not difficult to understand either Huntington or Bush. Huntington was brilliant, but wrong. He was a man of ideas and when brilliant men with the wrong ideas have the ear of power they are very dangerous. Bush was wrong and not so brilliant. But he was also the most powerful person in the world for eight long years. People who are not brilliant, very wrong and very powerful are very dangerous. In the end, almost the only people who agreed with the Bush/Huntington assessment of the world system were Bush’s closest allies among US Christian fundamentalists and his sworn enemies – Usama bin Laden and others like him who also characterize the world system as a zero sum game between forces of good and those of evil. In the end, Bush’s ill-advised military adventurism accomplished nothing. It contributed to a global economic crisis, alienated much of the world and almost the entire Muslim world and left his opponents feeling morally justified. In a tragic way Bush helped to create the world he imagined.

Today, the world is faced with the enormous challenge of recreating, or in Benedict Anderson’s terms, “reimagining” itself in the post-Huntington, post-Bush era. Bush will be forgotten more quickly than Huntington because brilliance is more enduring than power. His legacy lives on in book after book written by far less brilliant people condemning and vilifying the “enemy other.” This is the worst sort of Orientalism and thinly veiled Islamophobia. Others in the West who would seek to empower “good” Muslims unintentionally do Islam and the world a disservice. Today there is a “certain group” that seeks to define what “good Islam” is and to align these groups with Western thought and interests. This is also counterproductive. It assumes that Muslims do not have the moral, political and financial resources necessary to combat what is often called extremism and what is in reality to other side of the Huntington-Bush coin. It also identifies “good” Muslims as those who identify with western culture and political interests.

Fortunately, the election of Barak Hussein Obama as president of the United States offers an opportunity for a clear break with the failed policies of the past. But new policies are not enough. It is true that there are many political issues that must be addressed the post-Huntington, post-Bush era if a genuinely new and more just world order is to emerge. Chief among these is the “Palestinian question.” Because of the global symbolic importance of this enduring conflict there is little hope for a more peaceful world until there is justice for the people of Palestine. This

requires compromise and concession that many will find difficult. The nation of Israel is a fact and the outcome of a historical process that can not be undone. The fact of the nation of Palestine must be an equally established part of a post-Huntington and post-Bush world. This would be an important, and indeed vital first step in a process that must also include the transformation of discourse and ultimately of consciousness.

Changing “facts on the ground” and “lines on the map” is not enough. There must also be a discursive shift away from the symbolic structures of “Crusade,” “Jihad” and “Promised Land” as means of defining and speaking of otherness. All of these terms evoke images of violence, terror and self righteous “retaliation” and have the effect of demonizing otherness. Discourse that assumes this vocabulary is necessarily of one of domination and resistance. There is a conundrum here because the relationship between discourse and action is dialectical and self sustaining. In such systems discursive symbolic violence and physical violence are, in Tambiah’s terms, institutionalized. In the absence of such a transformation, the optimal outcome is a cease fire in a war that is fought more often with words and ideas than with weapons of steel. A truce with demons is one that can not hold. The result is a cycle of violence and reconciliation that it not genuine peace and is similar to that Herman and other psychologists describe as being characteristic of dysfunctional families. Any move towards an alternative discourse in which redefines the symbolic structures used for the interpretation of others and of world events. It is not clear how this move can be made, but it is clear that it must be if we are to avoid bequeathing the world that Huntington imagined to our children and grandchildren. Theoretical constructs from International Relations and Political Science offer little guidance here. I think that we must turn instead to discussions of religious and cultural pluralism in search for what Clifford Geertz would have called a model for, but clearly not yet a model of international and intercultural relations. Because the issues at stake here are theological and well as cultural and political discussion of some aspects of inter-religious or what is now more commonly referred to as “iner-faith” dialog as especially important.

James Spickard has described the struggle between religious universalism and particularism as “the theological battle of our times.”¹ The challenge of pluralism figures prominently in both academic and political discourse concerning the role of religion in public life in the twenty-first century. The term pluralism has been, and will undoubtedly continue be, used in diverse ways. It is often used to refer to social conditions in which there is a plurality of world views in conjunction with the absence of consensus concerning the ways in which they should be evaluated and acted upon. This leads to a political environment in which no single world view occupies a hegemonic position.² There are many varieties of pluralism: ethnic, ideological, political, philosophical and religious pluralisms being among the most salient. Of these religious pluralism is perhaps the most complex and problematical because religions typically make universalist claims about the most basic human issues, including the origins and ultimate fate of the cosmos and those who inhabit it, as well as moral and ethical conduction. Compromise or consensus on these issues is, at best, difficult to achieve.

¹ J. Spickard, “Human Rights, Religious Conflict and Globalisation – Ultimate Voices in a New World Order,” *International Journal of Multicultural Studies*, vol.1, no. 1, pp. 2-19, 1999.

² O. Riis, “Modes of Religious Pluralism under Conditions of Globalisation,” *International Journal of Multicultural Studies*, vol.1, no. 1, pp. 20-34.

In the remainder of this paper I will be concerned with challenges arising from the fact of religious pluralism, in a narrow sense of the term, and the ways in which Islamic Studies and Religious Studies can be employed to understand them.³

There are two basic types of religious pluralism: internal pluralism and external. By internal pluralism I mean that within every religion there are different modes of understanding religious truth and acting in religious ways. At least in the case of major “World Religions” there are no exceptions to this rule. By external pluralism I mean the fact that there are many religions and few societies in which there is only a single religion. These are facts and have been for as long as there have been religions in the case of internal pluralism and for many centuries in the case of external pluralism. They are also not going to change. Pluralism is a given. In the twenty-first century pluralism presents new challenges and opportunities because more people know more about “other religions” than they did in the past and globalisation has led to the distribution of all major religions across the planet. The United States, for example, has gone from being an overwhelmingly Christian nation to being the world’s most religiously diverse society.⁴ A century ago it was possible for someone from my village to know almost nothing about external pluralism. People knew that there were different sorts of Christians, and perhaps had very vague, and usually entirely inaccurate, ideas about strange people called Jews and “Mohammadans.” None of them would have known about Buddhists or Hindus, let alone Sikhs. Even when I was growing up in that village in the 1950s, I had never met people who were not Christians and certainly did not think about them very much. There are villages in Indonesia that, in this respect, are very similar to my own and many Indonesians with life experiences similar to my own.

The world has changed in very basic ways. It is now almost impossible not to know about people of other religions, even if you have never met one. This is one of the facts of Globalisation. It is not going away. There is no going back. We have no choice other than to deal with pluralism, but we do have a choice about *how* we deal with it. Internal pluralism is also a fact. It is not going to disappear. History teaches us that there will always be people that will try to make it disappear by some combination of persuasion and force. History also teaches us that they will fail.

If we have no choice other than to deal with pluralism, it makes sense to understand it, so that we can make better and more productive choices in dealing with internal and external “religious others.” This is where Religious Studies, and in those parts of the world where there are large Muslim populations, Islamic Studies, are important. They do not always point towards solutions to social, religious or political problems, but they do provide people with the kinds of information and knowledge they need to make difficult choices and hopefully can help to counter misinformation and rumors that often circulate in social context combining pluralism and ignorance.

Professor Diana Eck, President of the American Academy of Religion, and a long time scholar of Hinduism in India and more recently religious pluralism in the United States, has recently identified three dimensions of the challenges and opportunities of pluralism.⁵ These are pluralism as a civic issue, pluralism as a theological issue, and pluralism as an academic issue. While I am in agreement with most of what she has written, my own experience teaching, conducting research and living in Indonesia gives me a somewhat different perspective.

³ For an overview of theoretical literature on religious pluralism see M. Chaves and P/ Gorski, “Religious Pluralism and Religious Participation,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 27, pp. 261-281, 2003.

⁴ R. Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005

⁵ D. Eck, “Prospects for Pluralism: Voice and Vision in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 75, no. 4, pp. 743-776, 2008.

Pluralism as a Civic Issue also means pluralism as a political issue at local, national and trans-national levels. The basic choice here would seem to be that between accepting pluralism as a fact of life or fighting it. It is possible to fight pluralism at a local level and actually win. Ethno-religious “cleansing” and genocide are strategies for dealing with pluralism that have been employed all too often. It is possible to make life so difficult for people of “other” religions that they leave the community, go underground or -- you can kill them. None of these are pleasant, they are morally repugnant and they are dangerous, because violence almost always breeds counter-violence as Stanley Tambiah’s masterful studies of religious violence in India have shown so clearly.⁶ It is possible to fight pluralism at the national and trans-national levels. This is a fight that can not be won. Some Americans are afraid of Muslims, so much so that they think our new president actually is one. Some Indonesians are afraid of Christians. Barak Obama is not a Muslim but millions of Americans are. There are millions of Christians in Indonesia. This is not going to change. Because we can not win a fight against pluralism, and should not fight it in the first place, we must conquer fear of it. We do not have to embrace it. We do not have to accept the theologically questionable proposition that all religions are really the same. Nor is it reasonable to expect that efforts to convince millions of people to change their religions will prove to be successful. We have no choice other than to live with pluralism, so our best choice is to learn enough to live without fear. The same is true at the trans-national or global level. To put it bluntly, history teaches us that Crusades and Jihads do not work. Many people are killed, injured or driven from their homes, vast amounts of money are wasted and the religious composition and orientation of the global community changes very little. Rational choice theorists have taught us that individual and collective self interests are among the most powerful forces motivating human behavior. Accepting pluralism is a rational choice. It is clearly in the interest of all parties when these issues are understood. Unfortunately, inaccurate understanding of religious others often fosters misunderstanding of what self interest and rationality actually are. The demonization of others, portraying them in terms of archetypes of evil and in terms of what we fear most is among the defining features of religious conflict.⁷ It is here that Islamic and Religious Studies can make real contribution to the resolution of potentially deadly conflicts. It does not require great erudition to rebut the portrayals of religious others as inherently evil and dangerous. It does require courage.

Pluralism as a Theological Issue is more difficult, but no less important. The question that religious scholars, of all religions, must confront is that of: “If a particular religion is TRUE, why are there others?” Some religions, including Islam, are willing to accept theological pluralism to some degree. The *Quranic* teachings concerning “People of the Book” are among the clearest examples of theological pluralism. Mystical variants of most religions are more likely than others to accept and even to embrace theological pluralism. For many, however, there is no good answer to this question. And there does not have to be for people to live and work together in relative peace and harmony. A few years ago I was discussing this issue with people at the offices of *Dean Daklwah Islamiyah Indonesia* in Jakarta. When the topic turned to working together with Christians, and even Jews, one young man explained; “Oh, we can work with them together in this world, they are all going to hell in the next, but for now that does not matter.” He then cited a Hadith according to which, this world is hell for the believer and heaven for those who do not believe. I know that some people will find this solution to the problem of theological pluralism unacceptable. Speaking as a Muslim I find it theologically unacceptable – but it is at least better than the alternative of thinking that there is a religious obligation to fight and kill the “religious

⁶ S. Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds. Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. On religious violence in Indonesia see M. Woodward, “Religious Conflict and the Globalization of Knowledge: Indonesia 1978-2004,” in L. Cady and S Simon (eds.) *Religion and Conflict in South and Southeast Asia. Disruption Violence*, London: Routledge 2006

⁷ See Woodward, *Religious Conflict and the Globalization of Knowledge*, *op. cit.*

other.” The point I am trying to make is that even if we can not arrive at an optimal, or even good solution to the theological challenge of pluralism, which would be the best of all possible worlds, we can certainly work towards avoiding the worst of all possible worlds. Tarik Ramadan put it eloquently when he called for the imagination of a “new we” in which people of all religions, and those of no religion, work together to solve the problems of this world in reasonable ways and without regard for religious differences.⁸ Put another ways, the problems of *dunia* are exactly that and while we may ultimately be more concerned with *akhirat* those issues need not stand in the way of working to build better lives for our children and grandchildren.

Pluralism as an Academic Issue confronts all of us who are teachers or students of religion at any of Indonesia’s STAIN, IAIN and UIN, or at The Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies at Gadjah Mada University or in the Religious Studies Department at Arizona State University or in thousands of other similar institutions around the globe.. All of us teach and/or study particular and often very specialized subjects. I teach, among other things, World Religions and Religion and Violence. It would not be responsible to turn out classes into political arenas. We have subjects that we must teach and must continue to do so to the very best of our abilities. But, I think, we should keep these issues in mind and in whatever ways we can seek to instill at the very least values based on pragmatic tolerance if not pluralism in our students. We do more than teach. Most of us conduct research and write as well. Again, many of us have very specialized agendas that we must remain true to. But some of us, at least, need to think and write about the challenges and opportunities of pluralism even if we do consider them to be only affairs of this world (*dunia*). Methodologically it is also essential that if we employ techniques that implicitly or explicitly employ concepts that are derived from religious traditions that we be open to the possibility that religions *other than our own* can contribute to the development of comparative methodologies. We must also make it clear when we are speaking in academic voices and when we speak in religious voices.

There are scholars, most of them writing from the perspective of particular religions or from what I have referred to as trans-confessional religious thought, who seek deeper religious solutions to the challenges of theological pluralism and who find religious inspiration and opportunities in pluralism. Among these is the hope that by understanding something of other people’s religions that we can come to a deeper and richer understanding of our own. This may be too much to ask from most people, but there are some who would for this goal. In any case, shared religious understandings are not necessary for the construction of a more just and less confrontational international system. A commitment to accepting difference is.

Conclusions

Professor Eck closes her discussion of religious pluralism with the observation that:

Creating pluralist societies, whether in the United States or Indonesia, will require the energies of citizens who participate in the forms of public life, and civic bridge-building that make diverse societies work. Generating new thinking adequate for the twenty-first century and its religious life will also require the best of theological reflection in every religious tradition, new theological thinking that is responsive to the challenges of both secularism and religious pluralism.

To this I would add only that new thinking is required not only from theologians, but from those of us engaged in the practice of international relations as well. We can learn at least one lesson from Professor Huntington’s life and career. That is when their ideas are clearly and forcefully

⁸ T. Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006.

stated, politicians do listen to academics. We do not speak only to ourselves, as many of us often fear. We must hope that in the future that those who have the ear of power will speak very differently than Professor Huntington.
God Knows Best.