



Bernard Lewis

I'm Right, You're Wrong, Go To Hell

Religions and the meeting of civilization

For a long time now it has been our practice in the modern Western world to define ourselves primarily by nationality, and to see other identities and allegiances—religious, political, and the like—as subdivisions of the larger and more important whole.

The events of September 11 and after have made us aware of another perception —of a religion subdivided into nations rather than a nation subdivided into religions—and this has induced some of us to think of ourselves and of our relations with others in ways that had become unfamiliar. The confrontation with a force that defines itself as Islam has given a new relevance—indeed, urgency—to the theme of the "clash of civilizations."

At one time the general assumption of mankind was that "civilization" meant us, and the rest were uncivilized. This, as far as we know, was the view of the great civilizations of the past—in China, India, Greece, Rome, Persia, and the ancient Middle East. Not until a comparatively late stage did the idea emerge that there are different civilizations, that these civilizations meet and interact, and—even more interesting—that a civilization has a life-span: it is born, grows, matures, declines, and dies. One can perhaps trace that latter idea to the medieval Arab historian-philosopher Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), who spoke in precisely those terms, though what he discussed was not civilizations but states—or, rather, regimes. The concept wasn't really adapted to civilizations until the twentieth century.

The first writer to make the connection was the German historian Oswald Spengler. Perhaps influenced by the horrors of World War I and the defeat of imperial Germany, he looked around him and saw civilization in decline. He built a philosophy on this perception, captured in the phrase "the decline of the West"—*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*. His two volumes under this title were published in 1918 and 1922. In these he discussed how different civilizations meet, interact, rise and decline, and fall. His approach was elaborated by Arnold Toynbee, who proceeded with a sort of wish list of civilizations—and, of course, also a hit list. Most recently Samuel Huntington, of Harvard University, has argued that the clash of civilizations, more than of countries or governments, is now the basic force of international relations. I think most of us would agree, and some of us have indeed said, that the clash of civilizations is an important aspect of modern international relations, though probably not many of us would go so far as to imply, as some have done, that civilizations have foreign policies and form alliances.

There have been a number of different civilizations in human history, and several are extant, though not all in the same condition. Mustafa Kemal, later known as Atatürk, dealt with the relative condition of civilizations in some of the speeches in which he urged

the people of the newly established Turkish Republic to modernize. He put the issue with military directness and simplicity. People, he said, talked of this civilization and that civilization, and of interaction and influence between civilizations; but only one civilization was alive and well and advancing, and that was what he called modernity, the civilization "of our time." All the others were dying or dead, he said, and Turkey's choice was to join this civilization or be part of a dying world. The one civilization was, of course, the West.

Only two civilizations have been defined by religion. Others have had religions but are identified primarily by region and ethnicity. Buddhism has been a major religious force, and was the first to try to bring a universal message to all mankind. There is some evidence of Buddhist activities in the ancient Middle East, and the possibility has been suggested of Buddhist influence on Judaism and, therefore, on the rise of Christianity. But Buddhism has not expanded significantly for many centuries, and the countries where it flourishes—in South, Southeast, and East Asia—are defined, like their neighbors, by culture more than by creed. These other civilizations, with the brief and problematic exception of communism, have lacked the ideological capacity—and for the most part even the desire—for indefinite expansion.

Christianity and Islam are the two religions that define civilizations, and they have much in common, along with some differences. In English and in most of the other languages of the Christian world we have two words, "Christianity" and "Christendom." Christianity is a religion, a system of belief and worship with certain ecclesiastical institutions. Christendom is a civilization that incorporates elements that are non-Christian or even anti-Christian. Hitler and the Nazis, it may be recalled, are products of Christendom, but hardly of Christianity. When we talk of Islam, we use the same word for both the religion and the civilization, which can lead to misunderstanding. The late Marshall Hodgson, a distinguished historian of Islam at the University of Chicago, was, I think, the first to draw attention to this problem, and he invented the word "Islamdom." Unfortunately, "Islamdom" is awkward to pronounce and just didn't catch on, so the confusion remains. (In Turkish there is no confusion, because "Islam" means the civilization, and "Islamiyet" refers specifically to the religion.)

In looking at the history of civilization we talk, for example, of "Islamic art," meaning art produced in Muslim countries, not just religious art, whereas the term "Christian art" refers to religious or

votive art, churches and pious sculpture and painting. We talk about "Islamic science," by which we mean physics, chemistry, mathematics, biology, and the rest under the aegis of Muslim civilization. If we say "Christian science," we mean something totally different and unrelated.

Does one talk about "Jewish science"? I don't think so. One may talk about Jewish scientists, but that's not the same thing. But then, of course, Judaism is not a civilization—it's a religion and a culture. Most of Jewish history since the Diaspora has taken place within either Christendom or Islam. There were Jews in India, there were Jews in China, but those communities didn't flourish. Their role was minimal, both in the history of the Jews and in the history of India and China. The term "Judeo-Christian" is a new name for an old reality, though in earlier times it would have been equally resented on both sides of the hyphen. One could use an equivalent term, "Judeo-Islamic," to designate another cultural symbiosis that flourished in the more recent past and ended with the dawn of modernity.

To what extent is a religiously defined civilization compatible with pluralism—tolerance of others within the same civilization but of different religions? This crucial question points to a major distinction between two types of religion. For some religions, just as "civilization" means us, and the rest are barbarians, so "religion" means ours, and the rest are infidels. Other religions, such as Judaism and most of the religions of Asia, concede that human beings may use different religions to speak to God, as they use different languages to speak to one another. God understands them all. I know in my heart that the English language is the finest instrument the human race has ever devised to express its thoughts and feelings, but I recognize in my mind that others may feel exactly the same way about their languages, and I have no problem with that. These two approaches to religion may conveniently be denoted by the terms their critics use to condemn them—"triumphalism" and "relativism." In one of his sermons the fifteenth-century Franciscan Saint John of Capistrano, immortalized on the map of California, denounced the Jews for trying to spread a "deceitful" notion among Christians: "The Jews say that everyone can be saved in his own faith, which is impossible." For once a charge of his against the Jews was justified. The Talmud does indeed say that the righteous of all faiths have a place in paradise. Polytheists and atheists are excluded, but monotheists of any persuasion who observe the basic moral laws are eligible. The relativist view was condemned and rejected by both Christians and Muslims, who shared the conviction

that there was only one true faith, theirs, which it was their duty to bring to all humankind. The triumphalist view is increasingly under attack in Christendom, and is disavowed by significant numbers of Christian clerics. There is little sign as yet of a parallel development in Islam.

Tolerance is, of course, an extremely intolerant idea, because it means "I am the boss: I will allow you some, though not all, of the rights I enjoy as long as you behave yourself according to standards that I shall determine." That, I think, is a fair definition of religious tolerance as it is normally understood and applied. In a letter to the Jewish community of Newport, Rhode Island, that George Washington wrote in 1790, he remarked, perhaps in an allusion to the famous "Patent of Tolerance" promulgated by the Austrian Emperor Joseph II a few years previously, "It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights." At a meeting of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Vienna some years ago the Cardinal Archbishop Franz Koenig spoke of tolerance, and I couldn't resist quoting Washington to him. He replied, "You are right. I shall no more speak of tolerance; I shall speak of mutual respect." There are still too few who share the attitude expressed in this truly magnificent response.

For those taking the relativist approach to religion (in effect, "I have my god, you have your god, and others have theirs"), there may be specific political or economic reasons for objecting to someone else's beliefs, but in principle there is no theological problem. For those taking the triumphalist approach (classically summed up in the formula "I'm right, you're wrong, go to hell"), tolerance is a problem. Because the triumphalist's is the only true and complete religion, all other religions are at best incomplete and more probably false and evil; and since he is the privileged recipient of God's final message to humankind, it is surely his duty to bring it to others rather than keep it selfishly for himself.

Now, if one believes that, what does one do about it? And how does one relate to people of another religion? If we look at this question historically, one thing emerges very clearly: whether the other religion is previous or subsequent to one's own is extremely important. From a Christian point of view, for example, Judaism is previous and Islam is subsequent. From a Muslim point of view, both Judaism and Christianity are previous. From a Jewish point of view, both Christianity and Islam are subsequent—but since Judaism is not triumphalist, this is not a problem.

But it is a problem for Christians and Muslims—or perhaps I should say for traditional Christians and Muslims. From their perspective, a previous religion may be regarded as incomplete, as superseded, but it is not necessarily false if it comes in the proper sequence of revelation. So from a Muslim point of view, Judaism and Christianity were both true religions at the time of their revelation, but they were superseded by the final and complete revelation of Islam; although they are out-of-date—last year's model, so to speak—they are not inherently false. Therefore Muslim law, sharia, not only permits but requires that a certain degree of tolerance be accorded them.

It is, of course, a little more complicated: Jews and Christians are accused of falsifying their originally authentic scriptures and religions. Thus, from a Muslim point of view, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and of the divinity of Jesus Christ are distortions. The point is made in several Koranic verses: "There is no God but God alone, He has no companion," and "He is God, one, eternal. He does not beget, He is not begotten, and He has no peer." These and similar verses appear frequently on early Islamic coins and in inscriptions, and are clearly polemical in intent. They are inscribed, notably, in the Dome of the Rock, in Jerusalem—a challenge to Christianity in its birthplace. Jews are accused of eliminating scriptural passages foretelling the advent of Muhammad. Anything subsequent to Muhammad, "the Seal of the Prophets," is, from the Muslim perspective, necessarily false. This explains the harsh treatment of post-Islamic religions, such as the Bahai faith and the Ahmadiya movement, in Islamic lands.

Muslims did not claim a special relationship to either of the predecessor religions, and if Jews and Christians chose not to accept Muhammad, that was their loss. Muslims were prepared to tolerate them in accordance with sharia, which lays down both the extent and the limits of the latitude to be granted those who follow a recognized religion: they must be monotheists and they must have a revealed scripture, which in practice often limited tolerance to Jews and Christians. The Koran names a third qualified group, the Sabians; there is some uncertainty as to who they were, and at times this uncertainty provided a convenient way of extending the tolerance of the Muslim state to Zoroastrians or other groups when it was thought expedient. On principle, no tolerance was extended to polytheists or idolaters, and this sometimes raised acute problems in Asian and African lands conquered by the Muslims.

Tolerance was a much more difficult question for Christians. For them, Judaism is a precursor of their religion, and Christianity is the fulfillment of the divine promises made to the Jews. The Jewish rejection of that fulfillment is therefore seen as impugning some of the central tenets of the Christian faith. Tolerance between different branches of Christianity would eventually become an even bigger problem. Of course, the outsider is more easily tolerated than the dissident insider. Heretics are a much greater danger than unbelievers. The English philosopher John Locke's famous *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, written toward the end of the seventeenth century, is a plea for religious tolerance, still a fairly new idea at that time. Locke wrote, "Neither pagan, nor Mahometan, nor Jew, ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the commonwealth, because of his religion." Someone is of course missing from that list: the Catholic. The difference is clear. For Locke and his contemporaries, the pagan, the Muslim, the Jew, were no threat to the Church of England; the Catholic was. The Catholic was trying to subvert Protestantism, to make England Catholic, and, as Protestant polemicists at the time put it, to make England subject to a foreign potentate—namely, the Pope in Rome.

Muslims were in general more tolerant of diversity within their own community, and even cited an early tradition to the effect that such diversity is a divine blessing. The concept of heresy—in the Christian sense of incorrect belief recognized and condemned as such by properly constituted religious authority—was unknown to classical Islam. Deviation and diversity, with rare exceptions, were persecuted only when they offered a serious threat to the existing order. The very notion of an authority empowered to rule on questions of belief was alien to traditional Islamic thought and practice. It has become less alien.

A consequence of the similarity between Christianity and Islam in background and approach is the long conflict between the two civilizations they defined. When two religions met in the Mediterranean area, each claiming to be the recipient of God's final revelation, conflict was inevitable. The conflict, in fact, was almost continuous: the first Arab-Islamic invasions took Islam by conquest to the then Christian lands of Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and North Africa, and, for a while, to Southern Europe; the Tatars took it into Russia and Eastern Europe; and the Turks took it into the Balkans. To each advance came a Christian rejoinder: the Reconquista in Spain, the Crusades in the Levant, the throwing off of what the Russians call the Tatar yoke in the history of their country, and, finally, the

great European counterattack into the lands of Islam, which is usually called imperialism.

During this long period of conflict, of *jihad* and crusade, of conquest and reconquest, Christianity and Islam nevertheless maintained a level of communication, because the two are basically the same kind of religion. They could argue. They could hold disputations and debates. Even their screams of rage were mutually intelligible. When Christians and Muslims said to each other, "You are an infidel and you will burn in hell," each understood exactly what the other meant, because they both meant the same thing. (Their heavens are differently appointed, but their hells are much the same.) Such assertions and accusations would have conveyed little or no meaning to a Hindu, a Buddhist, or a Confucian.

Christians and Muslims looked at each other and studied each other in strikingly different ways. This is owing in part, at least, to their different circumstances. Christian Europeans from the start had to learn foreign languages in order to read their scriptures and their classics and to communicate with one another. From the seventh century onward they had a further motive to look outward—their holy places, in the land where their faith was born, were under Muslim rule, and could be visited only with Muslim permission. Muslims had no comparable problems. Their holy places were in Arabia, under Arab rule; their scriptures were in Arabic, which across their civilization was the language also of literature, of science and scholarship, of government and commerce, and, increasingly, of everyday communication, as the conquered countries in Southwest Asia and North Africa were Arabized and forgot their ancient languages and scripts. In later times other Islamic languages emerged, notably Persian and Turkish; but in the early, formative centuries Arabic reigned alone.


This difference in the experiences and the needs of the two civilizations is reflected in their attitudes toward each other. From the earliest recorded times people in Europe tried to learn the languages of the Islamic world, starting with Arabic, the language of the most advanced civilization of the day. Later some, mostly for practical reasons, learned Persian and more especially Turkish, which in Ottoman times supplanted Arabic as the language of government and diplomacy. From the sixteenth century on there were chairs of Arabic at French and Dutch universities. Cambridge University had its first chair of Arabic in 1632, Oxford in 1636. Europeans no longer needed Arabic to gain access to the higher sciences. Now they learned it out of intellectual curiosity—the desire to know

something about another civilization and its ways. By the eighteenth century Europe boasted a considerable body of scholarly literature regarding the Islamic world—editions of texts and translations of historical and literary and theological works, as well as histories of literature and religion and even general histories of Islamic countries, with descriptions of their people and their ways. Grammars and dictionaries of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish were available to European scholars from the sixteenth century onward. It is surely significant that far more attention was given to Arabic, the classical and scriptural language of Islam, than to Persian and Turkish, the languages of the current rulers of the world. In the course of the nineteenth century European and later also American scholars set to work to disinter, decipher, and interpret the buried and forgotten languages and writings of antiquity, and thus to recover an ancient and glorious chapter in history. These activities were greeted with incomprehension and then with suspicion by those who did not share and therefore could not understand this kind of curiosity.

The Islamic world, with no comparable incentives, displayed a total lack of interest in Christian civilization. An initially understandable, even justifiable, contempt for the barbarians beyond the frontier continued long after that characterization ceased to be accurate, and even into a time when it became preposterously inaccurate.

It has sometimes been argued that the European interest in Arabic and other Eastern languages was an adjunct—or, given the time lag, a precursor—of imperialism. If that is so, we must acquit the Arabs and the Turks of any such predatory intent. The Arabs spent 800 years in Spain without showing much interest in Spanish or Latin. The Ottomans ruled much of southeastern Europe for half a millennium, but for most of that time they never bothered to learn Greek or any Balkan or European language—which might have been useful. When they needed interpreters, they used converts and others from these various countries. There was no Occidentalism until the expanding West forced itself on the attention of the rest of the world. We may find similar attitudes in present-day America.

Today we in the West are engaged in what we see as a war against terrorism, and what the terrorists present as a war against unbelief. Some on both sides see this struggle as one between civilizations or, as others would put it, between religions. If they are right, and there is much to support their view, then the clash between these two religiously defined civilizations results not only from their dif-

ferences but also from their resemblances—and in these there may even be some hope for better future understanding. 

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