

NOT FOR QUOTATION

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CLASH OF CIVILISATIONS OR CLASH OF BARBARISMS?

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Introduction

Let me kick off with reference to a few recent incidents and stories.

- Cartoons of the Prophet Md (PBUH) with a bomb on his head.
- Latest Batman Comic book by Frank Miller 'kicking al-Qaeda's butt.'
- 'Muslims are not the only religion with a monopoly of violence, says Christian Archbishop Akinola in Nigeria.' Muslims massacred in Onitsha a few days later, following attacks on Christians in the North of Nigeria which prompted the Archbishop's remarks.
- The bombing and destruction of the Askari shrine in Sumarra, Iarq. An attack by Sunni militants on the beautiful burial ground of the 10th and 11th Shia Imams.
- Hamas winning the democratic election in Palestine, and attracting Israeli and US sanctions.
- 'US defence chiefs unveil plan for tackling global Islamic extremism. They envisage a conflict fought in dozens of countries and for decades to come.' (Guardian Wed Feb 15 2006)
- 'Europe's contempt for other cultures can't be sustained.' Martin Jacques in the Guardian.
- And some other images: Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, extradordinary rendition, Srebienica, beheading, suicide bombers in London, Madrid train bombings. And of course there are many others.

The world is in deep trouble on many fronts. The consequences of post-colonial and post Cold War capitalism are catching up with us, raising massive problems of sustainability in terms of pressures on global resources and climate change. The models of industrial and post-industrial modernity have created global expectations of

living standards and material consumption. These simply cannot be spread under present technologies and lifestyles to the present and projected populations of the world, significantly in China and India. This offers the spectre of large-scale global socio-economic exclusion in a world which is increasingly globalised, with the poor, vulnerable, deprived and insecure having clear knowledge of the wealth, security and power of others. Today's global population of 6 billion is due to rise in the 3 decades to 9 billion before levelling out. We have 30 years left to do something very serious for the livelihoods of our children, and the survival of our grandchildren.

This calls for some serious analysis as the route to solution, and not just a continuous trotting out of the doomsday statistics, or competing slogans about blame and guilt. Our human behaviour has to be understood better in terms of how we got here, and what we are likely to do next as well as what we ought to do next. We need some thinking out of the box. This evening, I am offering an explanatory contribution which is not just a familiar litany of global injustice and hand wringing.

One dimension of the sustainability problem are the forms of conflict which partially have their roots in global social exclusion and inequality. These inequalities are deepening, and preventing the necessary global cooperation to engage with the ultimate human question about the survival of our planet. In other words, we have a global political economy which is self-contradictory: it produces forms of conflict which prevent solutions and lead it to self-implosion. In a 100 years' time or less, the human race may collectively look back at the previous 2 centuries and ask how our generations got it so wrong in fiddling with petty squabbles while the world burned. More specifically we are in an era of new forms of global conflict, which do not appear to us as petty even though they must be, as judged against our long term collective interest. Indeed we may well be in a new paradigm of conflict, perhaps not witnessed since the Crusades.

To develop my argument, I will first critically consider claims for the 'end of history' (i.e. basic ideological struggles are over), which were replaced by the 'clash of civilisations' formula. This, too, I will critique with reference to the instability or contingency of western foreign policy. I go on to argue that 'orientalism' (i.e. the negative construction of the East by the West) alongside the military assertion of western power, transfers the politics of freedom into the politics of identity and towards a clash of barbarisms, in which tolerance and empathy for diversity is squeezed out by extremism on all sides.

End of Ideology, End of History?

In the West, for the last 3 centuries, the combined processes of the European Enlightenment and the evolution of capitalism have emerged as the 'modernity' benchmark against which all else is judged, and action justified and planned. Rationality and science have been pitted as secular universals against religion, mysticism and superstition. Christianity, however, has been singularly and uniquely plucked out of its mysticism and made compatible by Weber and others with rationality, science and capitalism.

This has been the basis for two versions of a universalist western thesis: the end of ideology; and the end of history. In their different ways, both contended that if history describes a process of struggle between big ideas then the struggle is over with the global predominance of capitalism and the social and cultural forces entailed in it. In the aftermath of the Cold War, Fukuyama's 'the end of history' had a particular resonance. The West had won out over the dark forces of a failing communism, with CIS countries and China liberalising their economies, India having also relaxed the grip of the state upon its economy and embarking upon an era of extraordinary economic growth. And we are witnessing the explosion of an Asian and Russian middle class.

A key element of this universalist western discourse has been the theme of overcoming powerlessness and alienation via the principles of liberal freedom--as in liberal democracies underpinned by market capitalism and entailing (Polanyian) regulation and social protection. Politics has been the politics of freedom--viz securing the basis for participatory citizenship (Rawls) and capabilities (Sen). I will be arguing that for many across the world, this option for overcoming alienation and securing senses of well-being has not and shows no prospect of working in the persistent context of global inequalities and social exclusion. As a consequence, other routes to the overcoming of alienation are increasingly attractive through identity politics and millenarianism.

Thus the apparently rosy scenario of the 'end of history' could never be believable from a wider range of vantage points. Inequalities have continued to prevail between and within nations, and have indeed intensified in some societies. Global poverty persists amid high growth rates. The sense of marginalisation is almost more acute in some regions than under previously more inclusive, albeit dictatorial regimes. The central Asian states and the Caucasus have been increasingly cut off from the Russian subsidies available under the Union of Soviets. The western regions of China look with envy towards the coastal East of China and find migration policies discriminating against them. The tiger and 'cheetah' economies of SE Asia experienced a dramatic financial collapse in the late 90s, revealing the precariousness of pyramid financing with weak state underpinning via social protection. The southern cone of Latin America, Argentina in particular, has experienced a more recent collapse without safety nets for the middle class--their savings and security wiped out. The problem of naked states. (i.e. Emperor having no clothes.)

Meanwhile the loss of sponsorship between Cold War protagonists has moved countries in Africa into new forms of destabilisation, as colonial settlements revealed their hollowness and unravelled. Something similar occurred for the Balkans with the end of Tito and Yugoslavia. In the Middle East, the post-Ottoman coloni-oil settlements split communities (i.e. the Kurds) while bringing others artificially together under single political umbrellas (Iraq), placed favoured nomadic clans on thrones and enshrined their respective dictatorships (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Gulf families), and then bemoaned their overthrows (Iran, Yemen). As the US emerged dominant after the WW2, Israel was privileged over Palestine, converting a potentially secular region into ongoing ethno-religious conflict spilling over into the politics of surrounding neighbours (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan). The regimes in Egypt and Pakistan, as reluctant clients of the US and Western Europe, retain a precarious grip on power, threatened by their economically excluded and millenarian masses.

The elites in Bangladesh, propped up by aid and remittances, can barely contain the rising resentments of its newly urbanising masses as they experience a sense of relative exclusion from the global bonanza. India, along with China, as an emerging global force, is economically eclipsing its neighbours as a stepping stone to wider economic domination, but has to rely upon the religio-fascist ideas of Hindutva to sustain promises of inclusion to its poor classes.

This doesn't look like the end of history to me.

A Clash of Civilisations?

But does this gloomy scenario of destabilisation and conflict mean that, alternatively, we are witnessing a clash of civilisations? Ever since Samuel Huntington advocated forced draft urbanisation (i.e. bombing and napalming peasants out of the jungle with Agent Orange) in the Vietnam war, I have been unable to take him seriously. But others have taken him seriously in recent years. Huntington saw the conflict of the future as between civilisations, differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and above all, religion. He particularly drew attention to the clash between western civilisation and the Islamic. 'The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, different civilisations whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power.' While Huntington inferred, in this statement, that all Islam is essentially fundamentalist, his thoughts were echoed by Osama Bin-Laden himself when referring not to a war between al-Qaeda and the US, but between Muslims and global crusaders. So they have that much in common!! Mirrors of each other.

Huntingdon, in effect, re-awakened the agenda of the enlightenment:

- the light of science and rationalism over the darkness of magic and superstition;
- the superiority of secular rights, secured through democracy, over the arbitrary authority of the holy alliance between feudal lords and clerics;
- much more recently, the superiority of secular gender equality over the social arbitrariness of gender discrimination;
- and finally the assertion of universal entitlements over the use of other particular and discriminatory labels (like race, ethnicity, caste, gender) to differentiate when resources and opportunities are being distributed.

In other words, the two legs of secularism and universalism good; the four legs of religion, magic, arbitrary authority and particularistic labels bad. The clarity of such contrasts are muddled by selecting and linking Christianity uniquely as compatible with these principles of modernity. This is a thinly disguised plea for the superiority of Christianity among religions through its implicit universalism. In Weber's terms, this is a clash between instrumental and value rationality, with Christianity, especially in its Calvinistic form, singled out as compatible with instrumentalism and thus capitalism. Unfortunately that privileging of Christianity itself entails racist senses of

superiority and prejudice, a continuation of civilising mission of colonialism-- Macaulay in India, for example.

Despite my own antagonism to Huntington's record as an applied social scientist, the clash of civilisations claim cannot be dismissed so easily. We would appear to have many examples of the proposition. But I will eventually wish to dispute his proposition.

Frontline Clashes

But let me first illustrate the Huntington-Bin-Laden formula by reference to the case of Bangladesh, a country I know well. This is a country of social and cultural Bengalis, whose Hindu outcastes converted from the 14th century onwards to Islam as an escape from caste oppression into the Ummah and brotherhood of Islam. Material inequality of course remained. The liberation struggles against Pakistan (47-71) revealed these Bengalis as more concerned about their cultural and linguistic identity in contrast to Islamicisation associated with Pakistan. The liberation struggle and the founding principles of the newly independent Bangladesh were strongly secular. People regarded themselves as Bengali first, and Muslim second. In other words, the state and political realm were supposed to be secular while faith was to be personal and private. That stance has increasingly changed with a steady intrusion of faith based identity into politics. How that has come about in 30 years is a long story, but Bangladeshi leaders of large development NGOs in Bangladesh (often the vehicle of principles lying behind western aid such as rights, poverty eradication and gender parity) have for some time been saying that the last fight in Bangladesh will be between secularism and Islamic fundamentalism. The talk is now of the Talibanisation of the society. Bangladesh as the frontline of the clash of civilisations.

There are many other frontline examples, in which global puppetmasters from Washington and Waziristan have been setting up Punch and Judy shows: Pakistan, Algeria, Nigeria, Chechnya, Indonesia, Malaysia, East Timor, Iran, other Gulf states and so on. I have left some countries out of this list, like Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia. They have additional layers of complication, and are particularly key to my analysis.

Let us reflect on Afghanistan. When I first visited in 1967, Kabul was a sophisticated, highly secular city (rather like Tehran) albeit in great contrast to the surrounding feudal-peasant society. The expectation was that the benefits of secular economic growth would gradually democratise the warlord structures and de-tribalise/de-ethnicise the society. Indeed the Soviet invasion for other geo-political reasons under Brezhnev sought to hasten that process. And indeed that might have happened but for the US 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' principle of its foreign policy. Thus the US sponsored a fundamentalist general (Zia-ul-Huq) in Pakistan, diverted Pakistan from its urbanising, secular path, created a state within a state (the ISI) as its vehicle of sponsorship to the Afghan refugees in NWFP, deployed the rallying call of Jihad against the Soviets, gave more than 70% of its military aid to the most fundamentalist of the liberation guerilla groups (Gulbuddin Heckmatyar) and laid the foundation of the Taliban. And let us be clear: the Taliban leadership, run by al-Qaeda (who were

invited by the US to get involved in Afghanistan to support the anti-Soviet Jihad) were fanatical, religious extremists by any standard.

The same 'enemy of my enemy' philosophy strengthened the Sunni Ba'athists in Iraq, by supporting Saddam Hussein throughout the Iraq-Iran war, in a short-sighted attempt to bring back a regime in Iran favourable to the West. No wonder the Shias of southern Iraq and Iran are suspicious of us and determined to unite across borders. And no wonder the Sunni are scared of the Shia-Kurd backlash to their privileged position under US sponsorship up until the invasion of Kuwait. And no wonder the Iranian government is interested in the nuclear defence option--after all Iraq was invaded, North Korea not, and Bush is visiting and paying respect to India which, like the US-client Pakistan, has not signed the non-proliferation treaty.

The Contingency of Western Principles

What these experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq show us, however, is that for the West (not just the US) the principles of post-enlightenment, western civilisation are contingent and dispensable if the 'lower order' material agenda of geo-political advantage, or oil, are paramount. Is this not evidenced by Saudi Arabia? So perhaps the clash of civilisations resides **within** the State Department in Washington? Huntingdon ought to know! How else do we explain the Bush Texan-House of Saud links alongside the New York-Israeli ones? Does that clash also reside within the British Foreign Office? Pro-Arab in the sense of supporting its clientelist regimes for so long after the Ottoman empire until Suez blew it off course, obliging it now to support the Zionist denial of Palestine as the price of nuclear dependency upon the US and thus staying at the high table of international diplomacy in the UN Security Council. There is now something ironic in the British forces in Iraq being embroiled in a sectarian and ethnic clash between Islams. I wonder how many British troops realise that they are fighting for the Twelvers against the Wahabi followers of the 4 Caliphs; and fighting for the resurgence of a Shia nation in the Middle-East, which will no doubt swallow up a predominantly Shia Kuwait. The point here is that by previously supporting Saddam's repression of ethno-religious identities in Iraq (Kurds and Shias), and trying to buy him off in relation to Israel (like others in the region), opposition to the resultant vicious dictatorship had to take on an ethno-religious forms as the only sufficiently strong, cohering ideology that would give the oppressed courage to overcome their fear. It was the same in Iran against the Shah. It is al-Qaeda's agenda in Saudi Arabia. It is also the Kurds agenda in Eastern Turkey, Northern Iraq and NW Iran. A recourse to identity politics, in other words.

At the same time, all this inconvenient evidence about the cynical contingency of Western principles tells us that this idea of clash of civilisations is a misplaced idea. It simply does not capture the contemporary realities of conflict, because too many games are being played simultaneously. We must not fall into the trap laid for us by a combination of contingent, oil-based, short-term diplomacy and orientalism. Short term diplomacy (with accompanying wars, of course) is bewildering in its attempts to have us believe the opposite of what we were asked to believe half a decade before. In this respect, the future for the leaders of several nations does not look promising in terms of Western favour: the royalty in Jordan, the Saudi and Gulf 'royalties', Karzai in Afghanistan, Pervez Musharaff in Pakistan, Begum Zia or Sheikh Hasina in

Bangladesh. Will they be our friends tomorrow? Why was the UK Ambassador to Uzbekistan sacked by the British Foreign Office for describing and objecting to human rights abuses? Why is the British Foreign Office silent on Turkmenistan? And so on. In other words, the idea of a consistent, ethical foreign policy is laughable, and everyone in this room could offer more examples than I have offered (e.g. to do with arms sales, such as the fighter aircraft for internal repression in Indonesia, approved by the new Labour government, soon after 1997). So how can we have a clash of civilisations without an ethical foreign policy? Perhaps we **ought** to have a clash of civilisations, but we don't right now. We have something else.

Orientalism

However, there is undoubtedly an underpinning theme, across all this contingency, of orientalism, through which many of our enemies are culturally constructed through a process of othering. And even some of our 'friends' have to be excused some of their behaviour on account of orientalism. We are observing a global process of labelling and mutual demonising. And indeed, we probably need the equivalent term of occidentalism to capture this mutuality, since the West is now being demonised by former colonial subjects and the globally excluded. And what is now interesting, and challenging, is that these processes of othering are not just cross-national as they used to be, but internalised within nations in the context of migration and large-scale diasporas. Thus orientalism is a process which occurs within the West, not just by the West. There are many features of these processes to unravel and in a lecture of this kind, I can only touch on some of them.

Let us be clear from the outset, orientalism as explored by Edward Said, builds upon a long tradition in the West which stretches back to the crusades, as much in the French as the Anglo-Saxon tradition. And in any epoch, it tells us much about the West, because the way 'we' construct 'them' is always and intrinsically revealing about us. Said's own work focussed upon European commentaries on the Middle East and Islam--or Arabs. That was a deliberate restriction. Obviously the principle of orientalism can be applied more widely. Thus British colonialism in the Indian sub-continent was replete with orientalism, as was the French in North Africa and Indo-China and again the British with regard to China in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is also clear that orientalism received a boost throughout the post-Ottoman settlement, with Lawrence in the subtle forefront.

Orientalism is more than just prejudice against Arab and Islamic ways. If it were just that, it would have been dismissed as the ill-informed racism of xenophobic extremists. But orientalism arises from much more serious academic thought and study--ethnographical and philosophical. Its elaborate anthropological accounts and textual analysis means it cannot be dismissed so lightly. It arises from broader scholarship, accumulated over centuries, and as such penetrates the psyche of the literate as well as illiterate West. Its overall import is that it constructs the Arab negatively in relation to the principles of European secular enlightenment. It has the Arab (and by implication, for our present discussion, Muslims in general) motivated by deep, non-negotiable faith and primordial attachment to kin, clan and tribal (or ethnic) identities. Thus, 'they' operate within tight and exclusive moral universes, and are thereby resistant to the positivist rationalities of science and modernisation. The

comprehensiveness of their faith allows for no separation between religion and politics. These simply cannot be conceived independently of each other. Thus politics and policy is pervaded by value principles which cannot be held up for critical examination and challenge.

These overriding values lock their followers in to a series of precepts about personal and communal behaviour which were constructed by the Prophet (PBUH) in the 7th Century to regulate the anarchic tribalism of desert trading societies in what is now Northern Yemen and the Arabian peninsular. The Qur'an was in many ways a pre-Hegelian text, seeking to establish a framework for order and security within which clans could securely and successfully trade. It was a codification of social capital, to enable property to be respected, contracts to be upheld (even when not formally documented) over time and space, exploitation to be restricted. All preconditions for successful mercantilist capitalism. Alongside, but not separate, were the strictures about women and alcohol. At the time, the precepts about honouring women were to improve their status and security not remove it, as well as to reduce the involuntary deployment of women in feuding conflict; and drunkenness was bad for women's security and much else. How to bring disparate, mutually suspicious, sexist warlords to heel amid desert anarchy? The fear of Allah. The creation of a powerful belief system with universal meaning, capable of transcending relative and specific interests. As always with religion, the assertion of an overriding public good. But always too, the paradox. The stronger the universal idea, the more entrapped the individual within values and principles derived from exterior logic rather than individual, rationalist logic. Thus orientalism combined a truth with an essentialist critique about excessive value rationality.

But, let us be clear. Within this orientalist tradition, as it gets popularised across Western opinion, is a dangerous process of homogenisation. Anyone with even the slightest familiarity with Islamic traditions will observe the strength of debates within Islam. More than 70 sects, with differing views about the literal authority of the texts (Qur'an and Hadiths) . Some major divisions. Witness the Sunni-Shia divide as the most famous, and the atrocity last week in Sumara (the burial site of the 10th and 11th Imams). I have had Muslims together in my classes in Pakistan, and have had to haul them off each other, as one denies the claims of another to be one by virtue of their sect! But there are further dangers too, as a single conglomerated version of Islam gains ground in the fevered minds of the White House, State Department, Pentagon and our own dear Foreign and Home Offices. This is orientalism at its worst and most pernicious. This is the danger of Huntingdon. Painting all Islam as the problem. This squeezes other traditions and practices out of the discourse, leaving only room for the bogeyman. Thus the enemy is othered and constructed. But it is such a travesty and misrepresentation of the wide spectrum of thought and practice within the Islamic tradition. Would Christians wish to have the breadth of their tradition represented only by the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Born Again millenarian extremism now pervasive across the Americas?

Crowding out tolerance and eclecticism

Before coming to the problem of the West and its barbarisms, let me illustrate my concerns about misrepresentation and distortion through the work of one of my PhD students--a British Bangladeshi woman. She is exploring the space for an Islamic civil society fulfilled by an increasingly socially conscious Muslim middle class, which is being squeezed out or crowded out between the secular agendas of western aid and the western representation of Islam as only extremist, with religious leaders and their socially excluded followers living up to their label. She is concerned that the clash of civilisations formula is steadily polarising Bangladesh into warring secular and extremist Islamic camps, forcing the unwitting to choose between falsely constructed options which do no justice to the subtle Bengali-Islamic traditions of the country. In the process, development and poverty reduction opportunities are being lost. Her work is controversial in Bangladesh, but is increasingly representative of an emergent tradition which says 'a plague on both of their houses'. And we see plenty of evidence of her position within the Islamic diasporas in the UK, and even within the demonised Pakistan where I work with many critically conscious, young Muslim colleagues whose private lives are loosely guided by Islamic cultural traditions, much like the swathe of agnostics and atheists in the UK who observe the major Christian festivals and have church weddings and funerals.

So in the Abrahamic religions, where does the intense millenarian, value-rational extremism come from? I might appear to have dwelt too long on problematising the Islamic tradition, but actually I have been talking about the non-Islamic representation of Islam as a problem. If we look further afield, we see an equivalent Christian tradition of extreme value-rationality evolving in parallel, as it were. Perhaps we understand the mirror image of Islamic fundamentalism most easily by contemplating the extraordinary rise of Pentecostal movements among the urban poor slum dwellers of Latin American mega cities. The 70s liberation theologians from among a young Catholic clergy, radicalised by poverty and the 'unholy' alliance between their bishops and the new LA bourgeoisie, have themselves been swept away by Protestant militants offering up the millenarian prospect of the second coming as a relief to present suffering. Looking north to the USA, we have the curious phenomenon of the most materialist society the world has ever seen also being one of the most religious, with born again Christianity rife. Witness the ongoing intense debates about intelligent design versus evolutionism as the compulsory element of the school curriculum. Witness the high proportion of students intending to be medics, in one form or another, going through the motions of Darwinism in their exams while really being committed to intelligent design. Turning Huntingdon around, we are witnessing the dangerous combination of a society which is not only convinced that its belief systems are superior, but which also has the power to assert them globally.

What has happened? Did the principles of the European enlightenment not travel too well across the Atlantic? Did the descendants of the Mayflower mediate the way in which the capitalist-enlightenment philosophy entered the states of America? Possibly true. But we should understand North America as the country where globalisation has hit the hardest. It has produced untold riches for some, but has left the majority of others either poor or insecurely and constantly on the edge of it. The traditions of social protection are weak, as are public goods, arising from a malicious combination of Calvinistic rampant individualism and religious condemnation of failure. The irony

is that this neo conservatism brings together the self-righteously successful alongside the socially excluded poor who have been unable to connect to the explosion of material acquisition offered by the US domination of globalisation, but who are placated by the religious opium that trails in its wake. These class, race and religiously -exploited poor are also mobilised by the bogeyman, which is of course a long tradition in the American deep south: originally poor white trash whose poverty was explained to them by white elites in terms of black competition from freed slaves. The bogeyman has been transposed, in the aftermath of both the civil rights movement and the Cold War, by orientalism, into a war on Islamic terrorism.

9/11 was a gift to this enterprise, along with preceding events such as the bombing of the US naval ship in the Gulf, and the embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. But it would be wrong to fall into the trap of thinking that the US and the West in general was reacting to these events as if they were the initial salvos in this 'war'. The point of understanding the contemporary significance of orientalism is to understand Prof.Exposito's (Georgetown University) analysis of Muslim concerns in terms of a century or more of humiliation and marginalisation--the global social exclusion. Among the extensive post-Ottoman evidence of this humiliation, we have the crystallisation in Palestine. To plead for a viable Palestinian state is not to deny the place of Israel, but it is to reject Zionism as one more barbarism. How sad it is, but understandable following the Holocaust, that Jews arriving in Palestine could not trust their security to a secular Palestine. But without accommodation in this region there is no security for any group, hence the need for a 2-state solution. The present situation in Palestine intensely symbolises the humiliation of the Muslim across the world--it appears as a microcosm of exclusion and inequality; a denial of human rights, honour and respect; and reproduction of alienation. Without a political route to justice, as for the Catholics in Northern Ireland for decades after 1922, violence is inevitable, and with it the squeezing out of tolerance and mutual respect--even within the Abrahamic religions. This is the explanation for the electoral victory of Hamas.

The Politics of Identity

What we learn from history is that where there is no political route to justice and freedom, because it is being denied by the superior force, then the politics of identity take over from other forms of conflict and struggle. This is because the politics of identity not only promises millenarian benefits in the future, it also offers immediate gratification, comfort and security in the present. It performs an affective function. It integrates its followers into a collectivity, and offers a spiritual sense of well-being amid material poverty. It is, by definition, inclusive. It offers membership and belonging--essential human needs. It is a primordial loyalty. Thus the politics of freedom are replaced by the politics of identity. But a sense of identity is only achieved through processes of othering, of enemy creation, of looking for difference and exclusivity, removing commonality. Empathy is reduced, and along with that--tolerance. Extremism and hatred becomes essential to this form of politics and removes the prospect of negotiation and search for common ground.

Identity can be a force for good in terms of producing cooperation and solidarities. But it is also a major force for evil. To return to my starting point, perspectives on what really matters for the survival of the human species (where we all have 99%+ of

our genetic make-up in common) are lost in the disputes over the less than 1% that divides us. That is my definition of 'petty'. But what we have ended up with, and what we will end up with as a function of the highly unequal global political economy, is a mutual demonising and the clash of barbarisms instead of the single civilisation that we all need.

As Edmund Burke remarked, all that is needed for evil to thrive is that good men (women) stand aside and do nothing. I was with Clare Short last week and her view is that we have 3 decades left before irreversibility sets in. Since this is a UNA meeting, it is necessary to observe that our present international political architecture is palpably not up to the job that needs to be done. It is also clear to me that we are poorly served by our irresponsible media, which is fuelling the politics of identity. It is also clear to me that we need political leaders who are not motivated by the acquisition of personal power. It is also clear to me that my generation is failing. But it is also clear to me that there are prospects for an alternative global movement which searches for the common civilisation--therein lies my hope and the prospect of 'unexpected light' (Jason Elliot's book on Afghanistan).

Geof Wood
Bath
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