In the riots that swept Islamic society last winter, reaction to the publication of cartoons insulting the Prophet Mohammed, the world glimpsed evidence of a clash between cultures—but not in the sense of the “clash of civilizations” that Samuel Huntington foresaw in his influential 1993 Foreign Affairs article and in the book that followed. Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” originally served as a new and bureaucratically useful paradigm in the programmatic vacuum created in Washington by the end of the cold war. Addressing a foreign-policy community deprived of that framework, Huntington substituted “civilizations” for “states” as the notional political actors from whose corner policy makers could consider future threats to the United States and generate future “scenarios” of international conflict.

Huntington was also reacting to several tensions: between Iran and the United States, following the 1979 overthrow of the U.S.-supported Shah of Iran and the seizure of U.S. embassy staff as hostages; between the Islamic Arab states and the United States, resulting from Washington’s largely uncritical support of Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians; and the perennial Washington preoccupation with the threat from China. Civilizations are not political powers. The nation-states that exist within a civilization have interests, often dictated by the civilization in which they reside, but they remain individual political actors in the traditional sense. The interest of a civilization itself is simply to be-to subsist, to flourish, and to survive.

The Bush administration has explicitly accepted Al Qaeda’s (and Iran’s) interpretation of this conflict as at least partially religious in nature. The “Great Satan’s” war against Islam is seen by Washington as freedom’s war against “evil.” So far it has consisted in terrorist outrages on one side, and, on the other, U.S. attacks on two governments that Washington associated with Al Qaeda (rightly in one case, wrongly in the other): the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Both now are overthrown and in the throes of reconstitution under U.S. tutelage.

This is not a clash between civilizations. Rather, it is a conflict with many conventional causes. For the United States, it involves an effort to control energy resources and the price of oil; to defend and promote Israel’s political and security interests; and, in the view of the Bush government, to assert a global security presence or domination. The last goal is misconceived. Pursuing it will end in tragedy—but that is another subject. Jihad terrorism is merely a sideshow in the affair.

Yet there is a real conflict between civilizations (as defined in historical terms), which began long before September 2001, and which modern society has already largely won. Western liberals and conservatives alike reject the values, assumptions, and modes of life of the vast majority of non-modern mankind, and have been deliberately or implicitly
undermining those cultures for many years—since Western exploration of Asia and the Americas began (inspired in part by Christian missionary zeal), and perhaps more strongly since the age of secular thought introduced by the Enlightenment. Imperialism and colonialism were the vehicles for this. The West, since at least the eighteenth century, considered it a matter of progress, and indeed a duty to Western religion and civilization. The West is progress and enlightenment; the rest is past. It is anachronistic and irrelevant to moralize about this. Imperialism, colonialism, and the missionary efforts of Western Christianity all had sufficient cause and reason in their own times. They happened, and belong to history. Although perhaps not entirely: the Danish newspaper caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed were first published in 2005, then republished earlier this year in nearly all of Western Europe and the United States. Publication was self-righteously justified as defense of a freedom of the press that was seriously threatened nowhere in the West—other than by individual fanatics, such as the murderer of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in retaliation for his film attacking Muslim treatment of women.

The unspoken text of what the West seemed to say in this affair could be translated as follows:

_We are the civilization most advanced on the scale of human progress. You are superstitious, despotically or tribally governed, scientifically and technologically backward, and all but powerless, unqualified for life in the modern world. We hold you in contempt, and display this by mocking your religion and violating your deepest values. (Catholics will recognize that something like this attitude lies behind much secular liberal anti-Catholic art and caricature in our own society. We Catholics simply have grown used to it, if not indifferent.)_

The response was:

_You, the West, are corrupt in the way you live, if not diabolical. Your perverse values, the licentiousness and pagan norms of your lives, their disorder and violence, and your aggressions against us and blasphemies against our religion demonstrate that despite your material power, your civilization is condemned by God, who will eventually enable us to avenge ourselves on you._

The West generally judges the merits of human societies in terms of material wealth and power, taken to be the products of enlightened progress. We Westerners believe that we now are creating, as New York Times writer Roger Cohen recently put it, “a century that will make a diverse world more unified, prosperous, and free than ever before.” Both liberals and conservatives in modern Western society firmly believe that. Since Europe’s exploration of Asia and the Americas, which predated the West’s technological advantage over Asian societies, and which awakened Christian zeal to convert those peoples, the West has increasingly regarded itself as superior to the rest and the bearer of truth. It seems inconceivable to most Westerners that the traditional world, in which everyone except themselves lives, might remain a coherent and valid cultural system for those who live in it. The issue does not even arise as to whether a backward culture-by our standards—could progress in its own terms so as to merit respect for its autonomous qualities. This was the case in the past. The pre-modern West recognized the Islamic Caliphate, Persia, Moghul India, dynastic China, and others as distinct but important societies existing on their own exotic terms.
Of course, nearly all societies assume their own superiority (or self-sufficiency or completeness), but historically, only Western Christian and Islamic civilizations have considered themselves universal civilizations with a mission of conversion. The claims are closely related, of course. Christianity imparted a divine mission “to the Gentiles” for the conversion of the world to prepare for the Messiah’s return. And Muslims believe they act on the “final” prophecy that completes God’s redemptive message—meant to supersede Christianity. (The third Abrahamic religion, Judaism, never believed it had a missionary vocation.)

The West’s original sense of supremacy and moral mission was powerfully reinforced by the arrival of the European Enlightenment and the spread of scientific knowledge and constitutional government in the West. Since the 1960s, the influence of multiculturalism in the U.S. academy has not reduced the effect of more xenophobic popular attitudes, especially with respect to Muslims.

A widespread assumption in both Western elites and popular opinion is that non-Western societies have no serious future other than eventual assimilation into a universal civilization dominated by the West. Along with that assumption goes another: that liberal values and democratic government are integral parts of modernity. This is demonstrably false. Illiberal modernism, after all, dominated much of twentieth-century Europe. In the case of the United States, the Bush administration’s rhetoric about universal democracy—its “neo-Wilsonianism”—is generally accepted in both liberal and conservative Washington policy communities, but it rests on a belief that history leads to freedom and democracy for everyone. On the presumed inevitability of globalized market capitalism, read New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman and hundreds of others.

The bulk of U.S. opinion doesn’t concede that even Western Europe presents serious alternatives to the U.S. form of Western modernity. The dominant discourse in the United States holds Europe decadent, in decline, and clinging to outmoded social and economic models. The notion that forms of modernity other than the modern Western one, or the modern American one, might develop is disregarded. Rather, that the United States will provide the “end of history,” which is to say its culmination and fulfillment, was largely taken for granted well before Francis Fukuyama wrote it down. Indeed, it has provided the theoretical basis for modern U.S. foreign policy.

That U.S. democracy might itself be in decline, already being replaced by a form of plutocracy, is a proposition usually met with indignation. Even less acceptable today is the argument that U.S. capitalism is now corrupt in structure as well as practice, exploitative of a labor force once considered (in Catholic social teaching) to have a claim on the productive resources of society equal to that of stockholders and managers. Without intending it, the “modern” world is destroying the ways by which everyone else lives. It considers this a simple matter of progress. Undermining the religions of other societies and the integrity of their cultures—perceived as remnants of the past—is integral to this undertaking. We are carrying out our universalizing mission. Few Westerners give much thought to the damage being done. Progress is believed to bring democratic
government, membership in the world trading system, participation in a global market offering cheap goods and mass-produced food.

The destruction of self-sufficiency that occurs in other societies, and the uprooting and proletarianization of their peoples, seem inevitable in bringing them into the modern world. Migration toward the rich societies, which has been growing since the 1950s, seems to confirm that this is what the people want.

Because traditional society is held together by religion, the modern West is in fact waging war against traditional religion. Why should it be surprised when the defenders of traditional religion strike back? When educated but deracinated young men in ghettos around London, Madrid, or Paris-existing somewhere between the modern and traditional worlds, with little possibility of living fully in either-attack what they see as a source of their distress, why be surprised?

The culture of a civilization is not fungible. Modern Western civilization is the product of its own history. It is what it is because of its past. Nobody imposed foreign ideas on the West; it assimilated what it chose. It owns the modern world because it made it. Urbanization, industrialization, and nationalism are its own creations, as are imperialism, capitalism, communism, and totalitarianism. To everyone else these were imported or imposed, sometimes willingly, sometimes not.

Modern communication has vastly accelerated what was once a slow and often creative interaction among cultures and civilizations. Now it produces violence. A revolutionary mingling of economies and peoples is under way, carrying with it competitive destruction of human societies as they previously existed.

Sophisticated societies such as China and India may, like Japan, succeed in imposing their own terms on this change. For the weak, it usually means something close to extermination. Consider Africa, and rural Asia and Latin America. Some surviving Bushmen, some nomadic societies of warrior cattle people in East Africa and Ethiopia, tribal groups in central Africa, surviving Pygmies in the Ituri forest, Amazon Indians, Palawans of the southern Philippines, some of the Melanesian peoples of New Guinea and New Caledonia: nearly all are disintegrating because of increasing interaction and heterogeneous mixing among human societies. The expansion of modern economies means even jungle dwellers cannot be left alone.

The aboriginals of Australia, and Native Americans, are too numerous to be destroyed as peoples, but their cultures now scarcely exist other than as retailed to tourists and anthropologists. They have been ruined by the white man’s presence and competition, to which few are able to adapt, and by his diseases and drink.

Francis Parkman, fascinated by North American Indians, passed a season with an Ogillallah nomad community in the Black Hills in 1846, and wrote of them in The Oregon Trail:

*Neither their manners nor their ideas were in the slightest degree modified by contact with civilization.*
They knew nothing of the power and real character of the white men...[but] with the stream of emigration to Oregon and California, the buffalo will dwindle away, and the large wandering communities who depend on them for support must be broken and scattered. The Indians will soon be corrupted by the example of the whites, abused by whisky and overawed by military posts; so that within a few years the traveler may pass in tolerable security through their country. Its danger and its charm will have disappeared together.

He saw that they had no chance.

A romantic view of primitive societies can be criticized on several grounds, but it is not just primitive societies that are under attack. Consider the fate of Russia during World War I, when a romantic (if professedly “scientific”) German-Jewish millenarian doctrine motivated the October Revolution. During World War II, Stalin appealed to Russian nationalism and largely abandoned Bolshevik internationalism to mobilize resistance to the Nazis. The postwar Soviet Union revived internationalist themes in foreign policy but the system eventually collapsed of its own internal contradictions (to borrow a phrase), and what remained was the legacy of pre-1917 Russia.

It then had imposed on it, under U.S. influence, still another romantic and universalist doctrine: market economics (assuming its primitive form: robber capitalism) and Western democracy. Only now is Russia laboriously emerging from the ruins, and what is taking shape owes more to Russian historical culture than to anything the Russians have experienced since 1917.

Much the same is true of China, where a narrow post-Communist elite is “enriching itself” by manufacturing goods cheaply for foreign-owned corporations, while China itself remains largely without economic or technological autonomy. China, however, is a sufficiently ancient and powerful civilization to take what it wants from the West, and eventually discard the rest.

We have yet to escape the totalitarian potentials of the modern age. Utopian ideology survives in both the radical Islamic mind and the American. Modern civilization has substituted material utopia for religious salvation. We often fail to appreciate fully the difference between religious hope and secular utopianism, and what it implies. Salvation in a religious worldview is reward for a worthy life. It is enjoyed in an afterlife, not in the here and now. Since Hegel and Marx, the West has been committed to a conception of secular history as purposeful development toward a meaningful conclusion. Since the Enlightenment unseated Christianity as Western society’s dominant intellectual and moral force, versions of secular utopia have replaced religious salvation as the goal of life. This promise is to be fulfilled in historical time—not in some afterlife.

The clash of Western civilization with “the rest” takes place along this axis of presumed human progress. The conflict mobilizes people, not states. And while it involves political and economic interests, it really concerns moral and religious values and identity. Because secular progress must be completed inside history, violence against those who stand in the way of humanity’s presumed destiny is acceptable or even meritorious. Why “presumed” destiny? I do not deny the obvious development of society-institutional
and legal progress, the benefits of representative government, the internationalized norms of justice (now, alas, under attack by the present U.S. government, which in its treatment of enemies has reverted to a barbarism last experienced in Nazi-occupied Europe), the increase of scientific knowledge, and the accumulation of the power technology affords. The moral progress of individual men and women is another matter.

Liberal belief in historical progress, the American one, confuses the increasing complexity and interdependence of modern society, the advance of technology and science, the expansion of human knowledge, technology, and commerce with the moral betterment of human beings. There is simply no evidence for this.

Obviously there is institutional progress in many respects—as measured by contemporary standards. Yet by the same standards there is decline. Who would argue that the Washington of George W. Bush and the moral climate of today’s Congress do not display deep regression from the republican institutions of America’s federal period (or from the idealism and solidarity of the New Deal years, or the World War II and early postwar periods)?

Describing the belief of the great nineteenth-century Russian writers, Isaiah Berlin wrote that the Enlightenment had promised that “solutions to the central problems existed, that one could discover them, and with sufficient selfless effort, realize them on earth.” One can believe this today only by denying the experience of the twentieth century, into which most of us were born. History is not widely studied in U.S. schools.

The issue of progress invokes a complicated argument, incidental to the point I am making here (about which I have written elsewhere, as in my book The Bullet’s Song). Progress enters into my argument because the real “war” that is taking place today is not between Islam and the West (or to be exact, a part of Islamic society and the United States), but between Western modernity and the values, assumptions, and ways of life of the non-modern world.

The jihadist reaction takes the classical form (repeatedly found in colonial history) of a violent and utopian attempt to recover a Golden Age. Its emotional force comes from a popular sense of threat and the need for cultural affirmation. This is in turn fueled by material backwardness and Western political oppression experienced after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in World War I.

The vulnerability of the non-West is not really military (the United States is losing the conflict in Iraq, just as it lost in Vietnam—military power is relative). Currently the vulnerability is economic. The mid-90s campaign to deregulate global finance and open the world to foreign business investment had U.S. material interest behind it, and reflected the conventional economic wisdom of the period. It was accepted by most Western governments as a program that would make societies richer by admitting them to the international trading system. It has accomplished this, but at the price of destroying what was there before: self-sufficient economies functioning within traditional trading patterns. (Its cost to the West itself, in undermining an economic society of corporate
“stakeholder” obligation and public responsibility, has only begun to be calculated.)
I do not believe in human progress. There is no evidence that humans today are, morally
speaking, an improvement on the Attic Greeks, or the Christians of medieval Europe—or
for that matter, the Magdalenian cave painters. As a Christian, I expect no such collective
improvement. I do not see that the moral elevation of man and of human civilization is
even the ambition of most of the contemporary West (as it was at certain times in the
past). Yet such was a vital part of the discourse of American and Western elites in the
eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As recently as 1951, the U.S. statesman George F.
Kennan described the purpose of U.S. foreign policy: “to compel the respect and
confidence of a world which, despite all its material difficulties, is still more ready to
recognize and respect spiritual distinction than material opulence.” This idea is totally
alien to the dominant culture and the political culture of the United States today. The
words seem from another moral universe.

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