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## What Clash of Civilizations? Why religious identity isn't destiny.

By *Amartya Sen* Posted Wednesday, March 29, 2006, at 6:02 AM ET



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STUMBLEUPONCLOSE

That some barbed cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed could generate turmoil in so many countries tells us some rather important things about the contemporary world. Among other issues, it points up the intense sensitivity of many Muslims about representation and derision of the prophet in the Western press (and the ridiculing of Muslim religious beliefs that is taken to go with it) and the evident power of determined agitators to generate the kind of anger that leads immediately to violence. But stereotyped representations of this kind do another sort of damage as well, by making huge groups of people in the world to look peculiarly narrow and unreal.

The portrayal of the prophet with a bomb in the form of a hat is obviously a figment of imagination and cannot be judged literally, and the relevance of that representation cannot be dissociated from the way the followers of the prophet may be seen. What we ought to take very seriously is the way Islamic identity, in this sort of depiction, is assumed to drown, if only implicitly, all other affiliations, priorities, and pursuits that a Muslim person may have. A person belongs to many different groups, of which a religious affiliation is only one. To see, for example, a mathematician who happens to be a Muslim by religion mainly in terms of Islamic identity would be to hide more than it reveals. Even today, when a modern mathematician at, say, MIT or Princeton invokes an "algorithm" to solve a difficult computational problem, he or she helps to commemorate the contributions of the ninth-century Muslim mathematician Al-Khwarizmi, from whose name the term algorithm is derived (the term "algebra" comes from the title of his Arabic mathematical treatise "Al Jabr wa-al-Muqabilah"). To concentrate only on

Al-Khwarizmi's Islamic identity over his identity as a mathematician would be extremely misleading, and yet he clearly was also a Muslim. Similarly, to give an automatic priority to the Islamic identity of a Muslim person in order to understand his or her role in the civil society, or in the literary world, or in creative work in arts and science, can result in profound misunderstanding.



The advertisement features a photograph of a woman in a black hat and sunglasses standing next to a young boy at a funeral. The text is overlaid on the image. The top right corner has the AccuQuote logo with the tagline "Saving You Money For Life". The main headline asks, "If you died today, what would happen to your family's future?". Below this, it says "Protect them today with life insurance." A large button says "CLICK HERE FOR A FREE QUOTE!". At the bottom right, there is a table of insurance rates.

	age	male
10-Yr Level Term Life Insurance	35	\$ 15.75
\$500,000 Policy (monthly premiums)	40	\$ 20.56
	45	\$ 31.06
	50	\$ 45.08

The increasing tendency to overlook the many identities that any human being has and to try to classify individuals according to a single allegedly pre-eminent religious identity is an intellectual confusion that can animate dangerous divisiveness. An Islamist instigator of violence against infidels may want Muslims to forget that they have any identity other than being Islamic. What is surprising is that those who would like to quell that violence promote, in effect, the same intellectual disorientation by seeing Muslims primarily as members of an Islamic world. The world is made much more incendiary by the advocacy and popularity of single-dimensional categorization of human beings, which combines haziness of vision with increased scope for the exploitation of that haze by the champions of violence.

A remarkable use of imagined singularity can be found in Samuel Huntington's influential 1998 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. The difficulty with Huntington's approach begins with his system of unique categorization, well before the issue of a clash—or not—is even raised. Indeed, the thesis of a civilizational clash is conceptually parasitic on the commanding power of a unique categorization along so-called civilizational lines, which closely follow religious divisions to which singular attention is paid. Huntington contrasts Western civilization with "Islamic civilization," "Hindu civilization," "Buddhist civilization," and so on. The alleged confrontations of religious differences are incorporated into a sharply carpentered vision of hardened divisiveness.

In fact, of course, the people of the world can be classified according to many other partitions, each of which has some—often far-reaching—relevance in our lives: nationalities, locations,

classes, occupations, social status, languages, politics, and many others. While religious categories have received much airing in recent years, they cannot be presumed to obliterate other distinctions, and even less can they be seen as the only relevant system of classifying people across the globe. In partitioning the population of the world into those belonging to "the Islamic world," "the Western world," "the Hindu world," "the Buddhist world," the divisive power of classificatory priority is implicitly used to place people firmly inside a unique set of rigid boxes. Other divisions (say, between the rich and the poor, between members of different classes and occupations, between people of different politics, between distinct nationalities and residential locations, between language groups, etc.) are all submerged by this allegedly primal way of seeing the differences between people.

The difficulty with the clash of civilizations thesis begins with the presumption of the unique relevance of a singular classification. Indeed, the question "Do civilizations clash?" is founded on the presumption that humanity can be pre-eminently classified into distinct and discrete civilizations, and that the relations between different human beings can somehow be seen, without serious loss of understanding, in terms of relations between different civilizations. This reductionist view is typically combined, I am afraid, with a rather foggy perception of world history that overlooks, first, the extent of internal diversities within these civilizational categories, and second, the reach and influence of interactions—intellectual as well as material—that go right across the regional borders of so-called civilizations. And its power to befuddle can trap not only those who would like to support the thesis of a clash (varying from Western chauvinists to Islamic fundamentalists), but also those who would like to dispute it and yet try to respond within the straitjacket of its prespecified terms of reference.

The limitations of such civilization-based thinking can prove just as treacherous for programs of "dialogue among civilizations" (much in vogue these days) as they are for theories of a clash of civilizations. The noble and elevating search for amity among people seen as amity between civilizations speedily reduces many-sided human beings to one dimension each and muzzles the variety of involvements that have provided rich and diverse grounds for cross-border interactions over many centuries, including the arts, literature, science, mathematics, games, trade, politics, and other arenas of shared human interest. Well-meaning attempts at pursuing global peace can have very counterproductive consequences when these attempts are founded on a fundamentally illusory understanding of the world of human beings.

Increasing reliance on religion-based classification of the people of the world also tends to make the Western response to global terrorism and conflict peculiarly ham-handed. Respect for "other people" is shown by praising their religious books, rather than by taking note of the many-sided involvements and achievements, in nonreligious as well as religious fields, of different people in a globally interactive world. In confronting what is called "Islamic terrorism"

in the muddled vocabulary of contemporary global politics, the intellectual force of Western policy is aimed quite substantially at trying to define—or redefine—Islam.

To focus just on the grand religious classification is not only to miss other significant concerns and ideas that move people. It also has the effect of generally magnifying the voice of religious authority. The Muslim clerics, for example, are then treated as the *ex officio* spokesmen for the so-called Islamic world, even though a great many people who happen to be Muslim by religion have profound differences with what is proposed by one mullah or another. Despite our diverse diversities, the world is suddenly seen not as a collection of people, but as a federation of religions and civilizations. In Britain, a confounded view of what a multiethnic society must do has led to encouraging the development of state-financed Muslim schools, Hindu schools, Sikh schools, etc., to supplement pre-existing state-supported Christian schools. Under this system, young children are placed in the domain of singular affiliations well before they have the ability to reason about different systems of identification that may compete for their attention. Earlier on, state-run denominational schools in Northern Ireland had fed the political distancing of Catholics and Protestants along one line of divisive categorization assigned at infancy. Now the same predetermination of "discovered" identities is now being allowed and, in effect encouraged, to sow even more alienation among a different part of the British population.

Religious or civilizational classification can be a source of belligerent distortion as well. It can, for example, take the form of crude beliefs well exemplified by U.S. Lt. Gen. William Boykin's blaring—and by now well-known—remark describing his battle against Muslims with disarming coarseness: "I knew that my God was bigger than his," and that the Christian God "was a real God, and [the Muslim's] was an idol." The idiocy of such bigotry is easy to diagnose, so there is comparatively limited danger in the uncouth hurling of such unguided missiles. There is, in contrast, a much more serious problem in the use in Western public policy of intellectual "guided missiles" that present a superficially nobler vision to woo Muslim activists away from opposition through the apparently benign strategy of defining Islam appropriately. They try to wrench Islamic terrorists from violence by insisting that Islam is a religion of peace, and that a "true Muslim" must be a tolerant individual ("so come off it and be peaceful"). The rejection of a confrontational view of Islam is certainly appropriate and extremely important at this time, but we must ask whether it is necessary or useful, or even possible, to try to define in largely political terms what a "true Muslim" must be like.

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A person's religion need not be his or her all-encompassing and exclusive identity. Islam, as a religion, does not obliterate responsible choice for Muslims in many spheres of life. Indeed, it

is possible for one Muslim to take a confrontational view and another to be thoroughly tolerant of heterodoxy without either of them ceasing to be a Muslim for that reason alone.

The response to Islamic fundamentalism and to the terrorism linked with it also becomes particularly confused when there is a general failure to distinguish between Islamic history and the history of Muslim people. Muslims, like all other people in the world, have many different pursuits, and not all their priorities and values need be placed within their singular identity of being Islamic. It is, of course, not surprising at all that the champions of Islamic fundamentalism would like to suppress all other identities of Muslims in favor of being only Islamic. But it is extremely odd that those who want to overcome the tensions and conflicts linked with Islamic fundamentalism also seem unable to see Muslim people in any form other than their being just Islamic.

People see themselves—and have reason to see themselves—in many different ways. For example, a Bangladeshi Muslim is not only a Muslim but also a Bengali and a Bangladeshi, typically quite proud of the Bengali language, literature, and music, not to mention the other identities he or she may have connected with class, gender, occupation, politics, aesthetic taste, and so on. Bangladesh's separation from Pakistan was not based on religion at all, since a Muslim identity was shared by the bulk of the population in the two wings of undivided Pakistan. The separatist issues related to language, literature, and politics.

Similarly, there is no empirical reason at all why champions of the Muslim past, or for that matter of the Arab heritage, have to concentrate specifically on religious beliefs only and not also on science and mathematics, to which Arab and Muslim societies have contributed so much, and which can also be part of a Muslim or an Arab identity. Despite the importance of this heritage, crude classifications have tended to put science and mathematics in the basket of "Western science," leaving other people to mine their pride in religious depths. If the disaffected Arab activist today can take pride only in the purity of Islam, rather than in the many-sided richness of Arab history, the unique prioritization of religion, shared by warriors on both sides, plays a major part in incarcerating people within the enclosure of a singular identity.

Even the frantic Western search for "the moderate Muslim" confounds moderation in political beliefs with moderateness of religious faith. A person can have strong religious faith—Islamic or any other—along with tolerant politics. Emperor Saladin, who fought valiantly for Islam in the Crusades in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, could offer, without any contradiction, an honored place in his Egyptian royal court to Maimonides as that distinguished Jewish philosopher fled an intolerant Europe. When, at the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the heretic Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake in Campo dei Fiori in Rome, the Great Mughal emperor Akbar (who was

born a Muslim and died a Muslim) had just finished, in Agra, his large project of legally codifying minority rights, including religious freedom for all.

The point that needs particular attention is that while Akbar was free to pursue his liberal politics without ceasing to be a Muslim, that liberality was in no way ordained—nor of course prohibited—by Islam. Another Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb, could deny minority rights and persecute non-Muslims without, for that reason, failing to be a Muslim, in exactly the same way that Akbar did not terminate being a Muslim because of his tolerantly pluralist politics. The insistence, if only implicitly, on a choiceless singularity of human identity not only diminishes us all, it also makes the world much more flammable. The alternative to the divisiveness of one pre-eminent categorization is not any unreal claim that we are all much the same. Rather, the main hope of harmony in our troubled world lies in the plurality of our identities, which cut across each other and work against sharp divisions around one single hardened line of vehement division that allegedly cannot be resisted. Our shared humanity gets savagely challenged when our differences are narrowed into one devised system of uniquely powerful categorization.

Perhaps the worst impairment comes from the neglect—and denial—of the roles of reasoning and choice, which follow from the recognition of our plural identities. The illusion of unique identity is much more divisive than the universe of plural and diverse classifications that characterize the world in which we actually live. The descriptive weakness of choiceless singularity has the effect of momentarily impoverishing the power and reach of our social and political reasoning. The illusion of destiny exacts a remarkably heavy price.