

CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

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By James A. Haught

President Bush says the war on terror and his Iraq invasion plan aren't a conflict with Islam. He's sincere, no doubt - yet there's another way to view the crisis, based on the long sweep of history.

In one sense, at least partly, the current struggle can be seen as continuing a 14-century "clash of civilizations" between the Muslim East and the Judeo-Christian West - a recurring bloodbath that has killed vast millions. Consider this record:

After Islam began in the early 600s, it unified Arabian tribes into a mighty conquering force. They battled eastward into India and westward across North Africa, spreading the faith as they went, crushing Christian communities.

Leaping the Mediterranean, Muslims swept through Spain and fought their way into France, before being halted in a historic battle at Tours in 732. Muslims conquered Sicily and Crete in the 820s.

In 1095, Pope Urban II launched a famous Christian counterattack: the First Crusade. "God wills it!" became the war cry as European armies and throngs cut a gory path eastward, finally capturing Jerusalem - only to lose it later. Popes loosed a Second Crusade, and a Third, and Fourth, etc. Crusading consumed Europe for five centuries, but Muslims always regained the seized territory.

What might be termed the final Crusade was launched in 1571 by Pope Pius V, who sent a Christian naval armada to destroy a Muslim fleet off Lepanto, Greece. Among the Western wounded was Miguel de Cervantes, later to write "Don Quixote." (Pius also killed Waldensian Christians in Calabria, Huguenot Christians in France and heretic Christians through the Inquisition - then was canonized a saint.)

Around the eastern Mediterranean, Byzantine Christians fought off endless Muslim invasions - slowly losing ground. By the 1300s, Muslim Turks were marching northward through the Balkans, defeating Orthodox Serbs in 1389 at Kosovo. In 1452, they conquered Constantinople. In 1683, they besieged Vienna a second time, but were driven back with terrible losses.

That was the high mark of Islamic conquest. After 1,000 years of advance, humiliating retreat set in. The Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution sent Christendom soaring to spectacular wealth and power - while Muslim countries weakened and declined.

Clashes continued. Conflict between Orthodox Russia and Muslim Turkey over Christian holy places caused the Crimean War in the mid-1800s. Christian Armenians mutinied against Muslim Turkey for generations, and finally waged an armed rebellion during World War I - causing a historic slaughter of Armenians. After Armenia became part of the Soviet Union, it plunged into hostility with Muslim Azerbaijan.

Muslim humiliation grew as European colonial forces dominated Islamic lands. In the mid-1800s, France grabbed Algeria, and later Tunisia. In the late 1800s, Egypt begged for help in suppressing a Muslim holy war in the upper Nile Valley, and Britain sent battalions with Maxim guns - then later made Egypt a "protectorate," along with Sudan. Early in the 1900s, Iran temporarily came under British and Russian sway. Italy took Libya. Almost every European country seized parts of Morocco. After World War I, Lebanon and Syria became French colonies, and Britain took control of Iraq, Jordan and Palestine.

Many scholars have observed that millions of Muslims are resentful because their once-glorious culture stagnated and is brushed off as third-rate by Westerners.

Perhaps the worst affront to the Islamic world occurred after World War II, when Western powers gave Jews a homeland in part of Muslim Palestine. Hate and killing over Israel have ensued ever since. And there's other strife:

Recurring Muslim-Christian warfare in Sudan since the 1950s has killed about 2 million. In the 1970s, the revolt of Muslim tribes against Russian dominance in Afghanistan might be construed as part of the "clash of civilizations." In the 1980s, Lebanon was shattered by a civil war between militias of Christian and Muslim ethnic groups. In the 1990s, the rupture of former Yugoslavia pitted Muslim and Christian populations against each other. Today, other Christian-Muslim conflicts are raging in Indonesia, Nigeria, the Philippines and elsewhere.

How much of this ferment derives from the historic fault line between the two cultures - and how much is spawned merely by local hate and regional political disputes? Frankly, I doubt if the world's best scholars could say with certainty. (Plenty of other wars have been fought for entirely different reasons.)

It's over-simplistic to apply bumper-sticker labels to complex international problems. Nonetheless, the great divide between the Judeo-Christian world and the Islamic realm always hovers in the background, affecting opponents.

Some militant mullahs base their entire careers on denouncing "enemies of God," meaning Westerners. And everyone knows that wealthy Osama bin Laden financed an international terror network to utilize this hate. Repeatedly, he has proclaimed that his jihad (holy war) is against "Jews and Crusaders." In his mind, at least, the East-West battlefield is quite clear.

World events can be seen from many perspectives, each correct in its own way. Is President Bush accurate in saying his blitz has nothing to do with Islam? Looking at the 14 centuries of mayhem, I'm not so sure.

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