The Clash of Civilizations in the 21st Century: A Political Psychology of Messianics, Charismatics, and Schismatics

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

Editor: The Clash of Civilizations in the 21st Century: A Political Psychology of Messianics, Charismatics, and Schismatics

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Abstract. This article describes psychological Issues that may contribute to or mitigate against ongoing and intense political violence between Islamic political entities and those typed as Judeo-Christian.

Some analysts of international affairs have predicted that--in the post-Cold War era--the future global security environment is to be one of fragmented national identities, multiple ethnocentric struggles, and a transnational and supranational global quest for economic advancement and political power that may challenge the efficacy of local, regional, national, and international law enforcement and criminal justice systems. Yet, other analysts posit a realignment of security Issues and values that will recreate a bipolar world. One pole will be constituted by Islamic, the other by Judeo-Christian values. This realignment will inevitably lead to a politically violent clash of civilizations.

How close are we to the latter notion of a bipolar world? Is this notion supported by phenomena such as the festering and seemingly intractable conflict between the Palestinian National Authority and Israel? By terrorist attacks against military and civilian representatives and other citizens of the United States by perpetrators claiming to justify political violence in the name of Islam? By international networking among terrorists purporting to embrace Islam as a validating rationale? By the rapprochement by many Islamic countries with Iraq and against United Nations sanctions against Iraq? By the recent nuclear tests by Pakistan and strivings for nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction by Iraq, Iran, and Libya?

Psychological phenomena supporting a coming clash of the two civilizations may include the following. (1) Arbitrary distinctions between aspects of life such as the social, cultural, political, economic, and military can fade and be easily subsumed by an all-encompassing religious ideology. Thus, the number of facets of one way of life that may be compatible with those of another decrease in importance. It becomes more easy to view one way of life as irreconcilably different than others. (2) The very identity of one all-encompassing way of life and one's self-identities based on it can more strongly be developed when they are contrasted with competing or different identities of other ways of life and the self-identities associated with them. There are other ways of life; they can be contrasted with one's own, and they, indeed, can strengthen each other and one's own through social comparison processes. Unfortunately, the strengthening may be better characterized as sharpening differences, inducing and reinforcing dogmatism, intolerance of differences, and the need to eradicate and expunge those who don't follow the Way. (3) Telecommunications and trends in ideational transmission within the context of globalization make it ever more difficult to protect one's values from sociocultural imperialism and contamination. Representatives of other ways of life may ineluctably and unwittingly be contributing to their becoming an enemy against and of the selves of others. The same telecommunications and ideational transmission phenomena can facilitate international networks and organizations working towards a common purpose of the figurative and/or literal destruction of others. All three phenomena can be intensified through and even partially constitute the messianic and charismatic aspects of religious ideology, leadership, followership, and violence.

1

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

But there are psychological phenomena mitigating against a coming clash that comprise variants of schismatics. (1) It is difficult to maintain a homogenous population over time without cycles and sequences of population breakdowns into conservatives, moderates, radicals, and the like. Although the definitions and behavioral referents of these terms may differ dependent on culture and era, a common consequence is that there will be differing propensities within a population for political violence against some common foe. (2) The population breakdowns described above may well induce intrapopulation violence or its threat--e.g., as current journalistic reports about conflict between the Afghan Taliban and the Iranian government seem to suggest and as myriads of Sunni versus Shiite and within Sunni and within Shiite violence have exemplified for hundreds of years. (3) Ethnic and so-called racial differences-- e.g., Arab, Persian, Malay--and political conveniences of fate, luck, and era may claim behavioral robustness over religious similarities.

A conclusion? A well-supported prediction might be that future conflict will involve clashes of civilizations. The fragile prediction will be in identifying the adversaries. (Ultimately, IBPP agrees with psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton (1997) that the clash may be between civilizations of apocalyptics intent on worldwide genocide and civilizations against this intent.) (See Byman, D. (1998). The logic of ethnic terrorism. Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 21, 149-169; George, K.M. (1995). Violence, solace, and ritual. Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry, 19, 225-260; Helminiak, D.A. (1997). Killing for God's sake: The spiritual crisis in religion and society. Pastoral Psychology, 45, 365-374; Huntington, S. (1996). The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order. NY: Simon & Schuster; Jehl, D. (September 7, 1998). Holier than thou: Behind the Iranian-Afghan rift. The New York Times, http//www.nytimes.com; Lifton, R.J. (1997). Beyond Armageddon: New patterns of ultimate violence. Modern Psychoanalysis, 22, 17-29; Peleg, S. (1997). They shoot prime ministers, to, don't they? Religious violence in Israel: Premises, dynamics and prospects. Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 20, 227-247.)(Keywords: Afghanistan, Civilization, Judeo-Christian, Iran, Islam.)