

The Clash of Civilizations and the Healing of the Nations

From the series: A Millennial Vision

Text: Genesis 2:9; Revelation 22:2

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

At this beginning of the year and the century and the millennium, I have been sharing with you A Millennial Vision, a vision of a world at peace, a peace that is created by the understanding and mutual respect of the respective, great religious traditions of the world. It was over a decade ago that I began to probe this issue; for me, it was quite a transformation to move from a rather honest exclusivism that the Christian faith was the only way to salvation, the only truth of God - to a pluralist position that recognized that other great religious traditions were both revelatory and that they did put people in touch with God, and also salvific in that they were the mediators of the grace of God. As I began to probe the issues of that pluralist position, I was very much aware of all of the questions that I would have raised to myself in my earlier years and I moved rather gingerly at first, although I was more and more deeply convinced that the great religious traditions did mediate that light and salvation, as well as my own Christian faith. But, I felt it necessary to justify and to explain myself because it was quite a move for me and for the congregation, as well. I, in the course of that decade or so, mentioned many times that my greatest concern was the fact that there could be no peace without that kind of understanding, quoting the great Catholic theologian, Hans Kiing, who said there will be no peace among the nations until there is peace among the religions. He went on to say there will be no peace among the religions until there is peace among the churches, but I can't wait that long. I think Kiing's point was well taken and I did believe that and I think we have come together to see that more and more. But, I never saw it as profoundly and was never convinced of it so strongly as I am today.

There was a book in the books that I was reading that was referred to now and again in footnotes, a name continuing to pop up, and that's always a sign that someone has gotten someone's attention, and so I went out and got the book. It's called *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, by Samuel P. Huntington who is at Harvard University, one of the recognized leaders in the country in the understanding of international policy and foreign affairs, and he writes this book about the clash of civilizations in order to indicate his understanding of where we are in the human global community today. It is his

contention that the world is not ever going to become one world, one universal world empire, preferably dominated by the West, bringing the whole world into our own image, but rather, the world is made up of a group of civilizations. Those groups of civilizations include the West (America and Europe), China, Southeast Asia, Islam, Africa, and interestingly, Christianity, which is the religious root of the West over against Orthodoxy, Eastern Orthodoxy, Eastern Christianity, so that Christianity actually founds two different civilizational cultures. Huntington's claim is that where we have come is to a point of groups, civilizations, societies, cultures that must learn to co-exist with each other if there would be peace in the world.

If you think about it for a moment, just over the last 50 years, for example, some of us at least can remember the euphoria of the end of the Second World War, and then the crisis of the Cold War, and during the Cold War decades the world was divided into two, two great super powers, and the rest of the peoples in nations and tribes and societies and cultures simply had to line up on one side or the other. It was a political division; it was a power play; it was a world at an impasse; it was a two-world system. Do you remember the euphoria in the late 80's, 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down? Do you remember when we in the West "won," and when, for example, the State Department analyst published a very provocative essay about ten years ago that suggested the end of history, that liberal Western democracy and liberal capitalism had won the day, had been proven right, that history was over in the sense that we had reached the universal and that the world would all come into tow in that kind of framework? Well, there was some objection at the time, but we did bask in the glory of that triumph after all of those Cold War years and all of those crises that we had been through with a standoff of terror with nuclear arms pointed at each other.

And then what happened? Well, it all came apart, didn't it? Today, as we speak, Russian troops are engaged in that very awful conflict in Chechnya which is, if you go down deep enough, an Orthodox civilization against a Muslim civilization. And, of course, the falling apart of Yugoslavia - Croatia, Western Catholic, coming to its own independence, Serbia, Eastern Orthodox, both of them practicing some ethnic cleansing on the Muslim people, and most recently the horror of Kosovo. So, we who are enlightened, liberal, gracious Western people say, "What's going on? Won't the world ever learn?" Things fall apart. Fragmentation. Just when the world was being spanned with McDonald's golden arches and Hollywood's productions and American technology and American investment. Just when we were creating one world, things come apart.

Samuel Huntington says of course it is never going to be one world. That demands global empire. It is impossible and we don't have the power to do it, anyway. Of course, it's not two worlds ideologically threatening each other. And nations - what are nations? Lines drawn on maps by powers at the time. Nations don't reflect deep reality. No, rather, the world is divided into a series of civilizations that are united at the deepest level of identity in their religion. I find

it fascinating that this probably is the best work since the Cold War in terms of the global situation, and it is by a Harvard scholar who points to the fundamental, critical nature of religion as that which informs the respective civilizational groupings.

Four out of the five major traditions are the foundation, the glue and the emotional center of these respective civilizational groupings. You can ask Dr. Boyd Wilson afterwards why Buddhism isn't, but Huntington says it's because, born in India, it got exported and transformed somewhat in Japan and Vietnam and China. The point is this - that what is being recognized today is that religion, religious faith and commitment, is absolutely fundamental to a civilizational grouping, whether it be the West or the Orthodox East or Islam or the Confucian states in the Far East. These civilizational groupings have a rootage in a religious identity, or I could say their religious understanding is the source of their identity. It goes back hundreds and thousands of years.

I recently read again a story of Athanasius and Arius in the third century. Alius was a priest in the Christian Church in Alexandria and he believed that Jesus was human, certainly God's mediator and representative, but human. And Athanasius said Jesus was God. The book, incidentally, is *When Jesus Became God*, written by Richard Rubenstein, a Jew. Very interesting. For two centuries that battle on the nature of Jesus Christ raged. Mobs in the streets, churches burned, people killed – it was a tremendous conflict between Athanasius and Arius, and Western Christianity centered in Rome was always more inclined to Athanasius and Jesus as God. The Eastern sector was always more inclined to Arius and the humanity of Jesus. Finally it was nailed together at Chalcedon at 451, true God, true man, but in the 11th century, East and West came apart. They mutually excommunicated each other. And today you have Western Christianity as the soil of the West and you have Eastern Orthodoxy as the soil of the East. Russia is the great core state whose religion is Orthodox, and when the Balkans began to explode, it was Croatia that is Western Christian and Bosnia that was Orthodox. Those splits going back through the centuries continue to manifest themselves and in our own experience, people, we have seen the horror and the slaughter of those ancient feuds and rivalries and competitions that continue to manifest themselves in this enlightened, advanced age of which we are a part.

The point is this - we live in a world that has become a global community, but not one world, but rather, groupings of peoples, civilizational groups informed and identified by a religious commitment, ethnic lines, cultural characteristics. We in the West who have come to such power and such prosperity would like to think that we can throw our weight around, and we have, and that we can have it our way. Interestingly, Huntington points out with data that is irrefutable that we are on the threshold of decline. Nothing is inevitable, but his plea is for a renewal of that uniqueness of Western values and visions. He points out that at this moment of our power and glory that is precisely when societies are on the threshold of decline. The society that believes that it has come to the end of history, to the

universal, is a society that is at the point of decline because there are others waiting for their place in the sun. He speaks about the tremendous power, growing power in self-consciousness and assertiveness in China, for example. And the resurgence of Islam scattered around the world, with a growing self-consciousness and a growing assertion of itself. It is a cultural, civilizational, religious grouping of people and those ties and those commitments are far deeper than a national allegiance or any other political alignment that can be concocted by leaders of nations.

So, that's where we are in our world today: respective civilizational groups. And what are we to do? Huntington would suggest that we have to learn, for one thing, that we ought not to go in and throw our weight around in the midst of another civilizational grouping, and we have to accept that there are those civilizational groupings with deep commitments that will simply not be cowed into submission. Oh, they can be beaten up for a while, but they'll not be uprooted, and that we ought to, obviously, learn co-existence through mediation. And that we should find the commonalities that are human, common to all people because they are human. The civilizations and societies are particular and they are relative, but there are some basic, fundamental human qualities that need to be discovered and cultivated in order that the world might live at peace. He calls upon us, as I said a moment ago, to find again our own uniqueness, a strong word against multiculturalism that tries to make America the world.

We are not the world. We are the West. The rule of law. Human rights. Personal liberty, and parliamentary democracy. A few fundamental pillars that make us who we are find their rootage in our Judeo-Christian tradition. Renew that. Believe in that. But recognize that we are one such group in the various civilizational configurations around the globe. Learn to co-exist.

That word is politically pertinent. Considering the Iowa Caucuses tomorrow, then New Hampshire, South Carolina. Would that the current Presidential candidates would discuss *The Clash of Civilizations* by Samuel Huntington. If they did, they would be unelectable because the things that need to be said and done in this country at this time would give the death knell to anybody's candidacy. That should disturb us.

If that is a word to the political establishment, isn't there a parallel word to the Church? If it is false that there is one world to be universally made after our image, if it is immoral to do so, if it is dangerous to try to do so, it seems to me the same would be true in terms of our faith commitment; that there, too, we ought to learn, as I think we have been learning, to co-exist with the great religious traditions. Proselytizing ought to be out of bounds. World evangelization ought to be a goal yielded up as unworthy of the Christ whom we follow. It seems to me that in the church what we need to do again is cultivate our own tradition, preserve our own tradition, seek renewal for our own tradition and learn to understand, from which will come respect and mutual enhancement of the

religious traditions of the world. Not only pluralism passively, but I would call you to pluralism actively as the only appropriate response to the multiplicity and complexity of the world in our day, a world that politically needs to learn co-existence, a world religiously that needs to recognize the deep rootedness of those traditions that need to be respected and understood.

If only we would come to understand that the other cultures of the world are saying to us, "Give us your technology, give us the wealth, send us your movies and your hamburgers, but frankly, we like our cultural values better than yours." Who are we to tell the rest of the world how it ought to respond to life, what its values and vision ought to be? Who are we to tell the rest of the world that our truth is the only truth?

In the Garden of Eden in the Genesis creation story, the writer was obviously saying that God's intention for creation is to be a garden, and there was a tree of life there. In the closing vision of the seer on the Isle of Patmos, the vision was not of a garden, but it was of a city, and it was paradise regained, that beautiful image of the city with the river of crystal and trees on the banks with its leaves for the healing of the nations. This is the vision, you see. This is the intention of the Creator according to the biblical writer. This is the dream, the healing of the nations. And how in the world will it ever be accomplished?

Well, of course, just to throw a ringer into the works, let me point you to Jesus, the highly impractical Jesus who says when one slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other. Who says not an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but yielding up to the other. Who says love your enemies. There are those who take those chapters wanting to preserve them as the word of God and infallible and authoritative, who say of those sayings of Jesus that they are meant for personal ethics, but not for great nations. Well, would this stuff work? Somebody would get beaten up, I guess. But, if it were going to work, should we who are powerful invite those who are without power to yield up their swords? Or, would it make sense for we who are powerful to begin the process? Now, you try *that* in Iowa tomorrow.

You see, Jesus is that disturbing presence in all of our rationalization. In all of our practicality and all of our wisdom, all of our savvy and all of our cleverness, we keep running up against Jesus. Would not Jesus say at least learn to live in a multi-civilizational world of diverse religious traditions, learn to see from the perspective of the other and understand, if you can, value your own path and seek its renewal, and follow me in the ways of peace. That, I think, is a task for the third millennium because in the third millennium we get angry and hostile and we have the means to blow it all up, you see. It's not really a possible way to go anymore. It's a matter of human survival beyond being the will of God.

References:

Samuel P. Huntington. *The Clash of Civilizations: Remaking of the World Order*. Touchstone, 1997; reprinted, 2001.