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# The 'Clash of East and West': Challenging the Terms of the Debate.

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**Whenever I think of the protests over Danish cartoonists' pictures of the prophet Mohammed, for some reason, my mind is drawn to a story in a Medieval Persian joke book I encountered some years ago while hiding from my job in the University of Chicago library. In it there's a story of a prince who is told there's a woman going around claiming to be God so he brings her in for questioning. She confirms she is in fact God. So he asks, "last year, we had some guy brought in, he was just claiming he was a prophet of God. You know what we did to him? We cut off his head. What do you have to say to that?"**

**"I'd say you did the right thing," she immediately replied. "I never sent that guy."**

<http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L200xH150/graeb-sm-09220.jpg>

In the 15th century, at least, people in the Islamic world were far more capable of laughing at things religious than those in the Christian West—who were in the process of developing forms of humorless intolerance (the mass burning of witches, or the massacre of heretics for example) unparalleled anywhere.

Others have pointed out that the recent outrage has a lot less to do with Muslim intolerance than with Danish treatment of Muslim immigrants (the newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, had, after all, refused to allow similar treatments of Christ for fear of offending people who were not helpless and marginalized); or that the riots in Muslim countries had much to do with the fact that this was finally an issue about which ordinary people could express frustration with regimes seen as complicit with Western imperialism but which those regimes could not, publicly, oppose. All of this is true and important. What I'd like to challenge, here, however, are the terms of the debate: particularly, the assumption that we are looking at a clash of East and West, of Western freedoms versus Islamic sensibilities. These terms simply don't stand up to long-term historical analysis. Rather, what we are witnessing is a kind of prolonged civil war with a single moral and intellectual universe—one that seems to have a remarkable capacity to shift wildly back between openness and fundamentalism, depending, largely, on the current balance of forces within.

Let's start by considering this the term "the West" or "Western civilization." Right now there are students in American universities reading Aristotle in English translation, and students in Mali reading the exact same texts in Arabic translation, in Islamic universities that have existed for centuries. Why is one an example of "Western civilization", and the other not? (It's especially ironic when one considers Aristotle himself would have considered the ancestors of English speakers utter barbarians, and Arabs, at least comparatively civilized.) In fact, the more one examines this term "the West", the more it dissolves away into complete intellectual incoherence. What is "the West" anyway? Is it a political category? A racial category? A cultural category? An intellectual tradition? It seems to shift back and forth depending on who's speaking and what point they are trying to make. It's common for example to say that democracy traces back to ancient Greece and therefore that it's somehow inherent to the "Western tradition." Is so, what is this tradition? A culture? If so, shouldn't the main heirs of ancient Greece be modern Greeks? A literary-philosophical tradition? If so, what to do with the fact that, until perhaps the 1820s or '30s, almost everyone writing in that tradition professed to hate democracy? The entire edifice appears to be a case of special pleading.

One could go further. Let us say, for the sake of argument, that we are referring to an intellectual and philosophical tradition. Crack open a history of Medieval Islamic philosophy and you are likely to be immediately confronted with quarrels between Peripatetics and Pythagoreans, attempts to square the categories of Greek philosophy with the revealed religion of Abraham and Jesus. Combine this with the literary emphasis on courtly love, the scientific rationalism, the legalism, the puritanical monotheism, the missionary impulse, the expansionist mercantile capitalism...-even the periodic waves of fascination with "Eastern mysticism"—it becomes perfectly obvious that this is the Western tradition; that in the rest of the world, Islamicization has always been a form of Westernization; and in

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fact that those who lived in the barbarian kingdoms of the early European Middle Ages only came to resemble what we now call "the West" when they themselves became more like Islam

If apply the tools of world-systems analysis, it seems to me, all becomes much easier to understand. For most of the last three thousand years there have been three main centers of civilization in the Eurasian world-taking "civilization" here in its etymological sense as "places with a lot of cities." These were China, India, and what we now call the Middle East. These were not only the centers of religious, philosophical, and literary traditions but also economic core regions surrounded by subordinate hinterlands to which they exported manufactures (silks and porcelain from China, cotton cloths from India, metalwork from the Middle East) and imported raw materials, cheap labor, and exotica. Each was center of its own larger 'world-economy' (China, for example, united much of East Asia in it's famous "tribute trade" system, which operated according to their own peculiar principles; the all were knit together, sometimes minimally, sometimes more tightly, by the cosmopolitan world of the Indian Ocean and Central Asian caravan routes.

Let us consider, then, the characteristics of the westernmost of these world-systems. It begins to take shape soon after the very first centers of urban life in Mesopotamia, which remained, at least until 1500 CE, its economic and demographic center. As an economic unit and political horizon, it extended east to Persia, westwards to shores of the Mediterranean, as well as into Mediterranean Africa and Europe: always at least as far as Greece and Egypt, often, during ancient times, extending to Rome and Carthage or even further. One might get some sense of how much this core area formed a natural unit in the minds of people in the ancient world by the fact that it never seems to have occurred to Cyrus, who founded the Persian empire, to push into India, any more than it occurred to Alexander to take on the barbarian inhabitants of Europe.

At least through the Middle Ages, most of Europe and Africa were in exactly the same position in relation to this center. Insofar as they were integrated into the larger system at all, they were classic economic peripheries, importing ideas (Islam, Christianity, Greek philosophy) from the center, but certainly not exporting any of their own; importing manufactured products and exporting largely slaves and precious metals. Simply consider the main form of contact between Danes and Muslims in, say, 800 AD: Viking ships used to raid England, Ireland, and Slavic lands and sell their captives in the East as slaves. (Demand seems to have increased in the ninth century after revolting African slaves seized control of the city of Basra and held it for most of a decade; convincing many in the Caliphate that Europeans were more docile.) Where now, Muslims work as menial laborers in Denmark, in the Middle Ages, Danes were transporting fellow Europeans to work as menial laborers in Egypt and Iraq.

The Arab conquests, the Crusades, the Ottoman expansion, the Portuguese outflanking maneuver into the Indian Ocean: all can be seen as the fluctuating fortunes of a long civil war between Islam and Christianity, the two major religious philosophies of the West; a process that gradually led to the system's center of gravity shifting from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean, and ultimately, Atlantic Europe. Obviously, Islam lost. But herein I think we can really understand its present-day dilemma.

The Christian West not only won the civil war, but-largely because in the process it managed to stumble on the Americas and hence unimaginable wealth-for the last several centuries, its rulers have managed to subordinating the old centers of civilization and dominate the planet as a whole. As any number of commentators have started to point out, this may well be starting to change. China and India seem likely to reemerge as something like what they had always been: major centers of industry and culture, equal players in a multi-centric world. Why has this not translated into a similar economic rise of the Middle East? Precisely because the Middle East is, as it has always been, an inherent part-if now, the defeated part-of that very Western system. The Islamic world is facing a double marginalization. Having lost the battle for dominance within the West, it seems likely to be sinking with it as that Western system itself declines in relative significance. If the result is, in many quarters, rage and frustration, we must remember this is not due to some inherent feature of Islam. Fundamentalism and puritanical violence just seems to be what happens to the Western tradition when some section of it feels they have been denied their rightful position of dominance, or even, sometimes feel likely to be. At least, one sees remarkably similar impulses in Medieval

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Europe, among contemporary Islamist movements, or in the declining empire of the contemporary United States.

In geopolitical terms, probably the best hope for an Islamic renaissance would lie in the Muslim world's regaining its medieval hegemony over the cosmopolitan world of the Indian Ocean (won in a first wave of Westernization in the High Middle Ages) or central Asia. This would make Islam again the intermediary between the three great centers of civilization. Osama bin Laden and his followers would seem to be playing to something like this strategy.

All this is not necessarily as bleak as it might seem. Let me end with a few tentative thoughts, however undeveloped:

1) since 1999 or so the world has seen the clash of three different forces - the elites of the core states of the North Atlantic world system, with their "Washington consensus"; a kind of global uprising of horizontally oriented, even, to a large degree, anarchist-inspired social movements based in the core states of the North Atlantic world system but above all in their former colonies; and the return of the Medieval Indian Ocean-based world-system, of which Bin Laden seems to be trying to present himself as the political avatar.

2) the global uprising managed to destroy the Washington consensus in a remarkably short time; North Atlantic elites normally deal with such challenges by shifting the world to a war mobilization, and in this, Al Qaeda might be said to have saved them. However this solution does not seem to be sustainable. While the last time around, global war mobilization lasted over seventy years (from 1914-1989 or '91), this time it seems unlikely to last seven.

3) the real dilemma of the next century will likely be this: while for most in the postcolonial world (notably Latin America) it is very hard to see states as anything but alien impositions, for the former centers of the world like China, India, and the core of the Islamic world, it seems to many that is the very loss of once-powerful states that has created current global inequalities. Partly as a result, direct action oriented, anarchist-inspired movements have not, for the most part, taken root there. (The one exception is India, in an anomalous position, with a foot in both worlds, as it were, since unlike the others it was for centuries a colony.) Perhaps the greatest stakes in world history right now is whether such movements will, eventually establish themselves in these future world powers.