

## *Conflict or Alliance of Civilization vs. the Unspoken Worldwide Class Struggle*

### **Why Huntington and Beck Are Wrong**

By VICENTE NAVARRO

**I**n recent years, a public debate has been underway in the Western world, both in academic journals and in the mainstream press, between Samuel Huntington, Professor of Political Science at Harvard University, and Ulrich Beck, Professor of Sociology at Munich University, Germany. The topic is the historical relationship between Christian and Muslim civilizations. While they disagree on some components of this relationship -- Huntington emphasizes the territoriality of the conflict, but Beck questions this aspect -- they agree that there is a continuing conflict between the two civilizations. Huntington attributes this to a conflict of values and a desire for territorial and demographic expansion by both civilizations; Beck attributes it to the frequent humiliation of the Muslim countries caused by the Christian civilizations. This debate has achieved enormous visibility in the popular press.

The problem with Huntington's and Beck's interpretations is that both assume the two civilizations have been in conflict for the past 50 years. But this assumption is wrong. A historical and political analysis of Christian and Muslim civilizations and their interactions shows that political, intellectual, religious, and cultural leaders of both civilizations have collaborated extensively, forging an *alliance* of civilizations against a common enemy: lay progressive forces, whether socialists, communists, or Arab secular nationalists, that threaten the class interests of the alliance. Thus, the alliance between Christian and Muslim civilizations was actually an alliance among the dominant classes (of both civilizations) that were threatened by progressive movements.

#### **The Alliance of Christian and Muslim Civilizations**

An analysis of our recent past--the second half of the twentieth century--shows there has been no conflict, but rather an alliance, between Christian and Muslim civilizations. One indicator of this alliance is that the vast majority of radical Islamic fundamentalist organizations, now considered terrorists, were once actively supported by the leaders of Christian civilizations. While the mainstream Western media have failed to inform their readers about this, the empirical evidence for such support exists. In his book [Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam](#), Robert Dreyfus documents extensively how the U.S. and U.K. governments supported the majority of Muslim fundamentalist associations (again, now defined as terrorists), and in fact played a key role in establishing and

developing these groups. Dreyfus shows, for example, how both governments actively supported the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s. This extremely violent group was started in Egypt and, with the support of Saudi Arabia, expanded throughout the Arab world. In the 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood helped to establish the Movement of Islamic Resistance, known as Hamas, the radical Muslim Palestinian group that today governs the Palestinian people. Again in the 1950s, the U.S. and U.K. governments also supported the Mullahs (fundamentalist Muslim clerics) in Iran, led by Khomeini, who later became the leaders of that country. And the U.S. and U.K. governments also actively supported (with the assistance of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan) the Taliban in Afghanistan.

In all these supportive efforts by the U.S. and U.K. governments, the religious and cultural values of Islamic fundamentalists were not seen as an obstacle; quite the contrary. Religious fundamentalism in both Christian and Muslim civilizations was crucial to the development of the alliance between civilizations. As stated by an official document of the U.S. State Department, "the attractiveness of such Muslim movements is their messianic character, similar to the born-again Christians of the South in the U.S. Moreover, they are profoundly anti-communist" (*The World Situation*, 1978). Thus there was no conflict but rather a religious and cultural affinity between the leaders of the Christian and Muslim civilizations. This affinity of values, however, was not enough to establish an alliance. Why would the leaders of Christian civilizations support Islamic fundamentalists clearly oriented toward the use of violence in pursuing their objectives? The question posed by Huntington and Beck should have been, not so much what divides, but what unites the two civilizations. The answer is clear: What united the leaders of the two civilizations was class interests. These interests determined their objectives, their alliances, and their enemies. This is the reality behind the erroneous slogan "a conflict of civilizations." The alliance was forged on the basis of not just a commonality of religious values, but also -- and above all -- a commonality of class interests.

The alliance was established to defeat and eliminate progressive lay movements led by socialists, communists, or Arab nationalists who were successfully mobilizing the Muslim masses (working classes, peasantry, and sectors of the professional middle classes) against the dominant classes of the Muslim countries that were enjoying the support of the governments of the Christian civilizations. The alliance between the governing elites of the Christian and Muslim civilizations was based on threats to their common economic interests (primarily, but not exclusively, oil) by the burgeoning progressive forces. Given the extreme poverty of the vast majority of people in the midst of enormous wealth in many of the Muslim countries, an eruption was inevitable. In their own interests, the dominant classes of Christian and Muslim civilizations needed to channel the frustrations of the masses of people away from the progressive movements. The great challenge for the dominant classes was to eliminate the threat of a class mobilization against them, and the method at hand was to demobilize political impulses and replace them with a multi-class mobilization based on religious fervor. A multi-class religious fundamentalism could channel the energy of a mass mobilization, not against the dominant classes, but in support of a religious identity--a commonality of interests and identity among dominated and dominant classes. This strategy is not new. In Southern Europe, the dominant landowners and oligarchy, in collaboration with the Catholic Church, established the Christian Democratic Party in response to peasants' and workers' parties that were threatening their interests. Class struggle was replaced by social cohesion, with Christianity as the multi-class glue that would keep classes together--under, of course, the dominion and hegemony of the dominant classes. The intention of this project, based on a religious fundamentalism, was to channel the energy and frustration of the popular classes toward an external agent: to promote a defense of religion threatened by unchristian progressive forces. The same dynamics operated in the Muslim countries, with dominant classes promoting

Islamic fundamentalism among the disenfranchised majorities. Let's look at some historical details, case by case.

### **Support of Islamic Fundamentalism by the Governing Elites of the Christian Civilizations**

The support given by the U.S. and U.K. governments (considered the defenders of Christian civilization) to the Muslim Brotherhood was a response of the dominant classes of Egypt (then the most important Arab country), the U.S., and the U.K. to the loss of power by King Farouk, forced to step down in 1952 under pressure from an Arab nationalist, socialist-oriented movement (allied to left-wing parties in the Arab world). The attractiveness of the Muslim Brotherhood to the dominant-class alliance was its religious fundamentalism (which could mobilize the Arab masses) and its profound anti-communism and anti-laicism. Secret documents prepared by the U.S. and U.K. Secret Services (cited by Dreyfus in his book) record the assistance provided to the Muslim Brotherhood by these governments.

President Nasser's socialist program in Egypt threatened the dominant classes of the entire Arab world. Under the leadership of the House of Saud, the royal family of Saudi Arabia, an international association was established in 1962--the International Islamic League--that funded and supported Islamic fundamentalists worldwide. The League is still very active, supporting these fundamentalist groups in all parts of the world, including Europe. The League's European hq is in Brussels. Its main objective is stated quite clearly in its main charter: to "eliminate and eradicate from the world the atheistic and lay forces well-represented in communism, which denies God's existence and distances men from Islam." By "communism" it means any force that challenges class power relations in the Muslim world. In response to this call, fundamentalist forces have killed left-wing leaders in all Muslim and Arab countries, including the general secretary of the socialist party of Morocco, leaders of the left in Lebanon (assassinated by the Muslim fundamentalist group Hezbollah), and a long list of other progressive figures.

A similar situation has occurred in Sudan, where the governing Islamic National Front (a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood) has killed leaders of the Sudanese left. And in Indonesia, the most brutal repression ever exercised in Asia against progressive forces (led in Indonesia by the world's largest non-governing Communist Party) occurred in 1965, carried out by a military dictatorship, with the active support of Islamic fundamentalists. Nearly a million people were killed, with the blessing of the leaders of the Christian governments in the U.S. and the U.K. [and the active connivance and encouragement of the CIA. Editors.]

In Palestine, Saudi Arabia and the International Islamic League (and the U.S. and U.K. governments) at one time supported Hamas against the progressive Palestinian forces. In Iran, the enemy of the dominant classes (and the U.S. and U.K. governments) was Mossadegh's government--supported by the Communist Party--whose reforms adversely affected dominant-class interests. Khomeini led the anti-Mossadegh movement that culminated with the coup of 1953. The much hated Shah's dictatorship, established by the coup, proved very unstable (and later collapsed), which explains why the governments of the Christian civilizations supported the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran--as an alternative to a secular republic, a progressive republic, led by the Communist Party. And, again, something similar occurred in Afghanistan, where the Taliban and Al Qaeda were actively supported with funds and guns by the Christian leaders of the U.S. and U.K. governments to stop the reforms led by the Afghan Communist Party. Other supporters of the Taliban were Saudi Arabia, the Vatican of the Muslim world, and

the Pakistan military regime, which in 1979 had killed the socialist President Bhutto, head of a democratically elected socialist government.

In all these cases, support by the political leaders of the Christian civilizations for Islamic fundamentalists has been explained and justified with geopolitical arguments--that is, by the need to oppose expansion of the Soviet Union, and presenting progressive forces anywhere as being mere puppets of the Soviet Union. This argument is easily dismissed: Christian leaders' support for the Islamic fundamentalists continued after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Geopolitical arguments for the class alliance between Christian civilizations and Islamic fundamentalists simply do not hold up.

Interestingly, the only country where Islamic fundamentalists were not instruments of the dominant classes was Iraq. In that country, the dominant classes saw the collapse of the monarchy as a consequence of popular mobilizations led by the Iraqi Communist Party, allied to sectors of lay, anti-imperialist Arab nationalists in the Iraqi Army. Opposition to these progressive movements came from the Army itself, led by Saddam Hussein. Supported by the U.S. and U.K. governments, Saddam Hussein established an extremely repressive dictatorship, and this dictatorship continued to receive support from those governments, for most of its mandate, until its last few years.

### **Final Observations**

All these documented facts show a reality that is not reported by the mainstream media: behind a supposed "conflict" between Christian and Muslim civilizations there has been a class alliance. An alliance of this type first existed in Spain in the 1930s. Muslim Moroccan troops fought with the Catholic-supported fascists in the military coup of 1936, led by General Franco, against a democratically elected progressive government--in what the Spanish Catholic Church defined as a Crusade. The Muslim troops supported a Crusade against the infidels who denied God. And just as the Spanish Civil War was a prologue for World War II, introducing the cast of characters that would take the stage in that war, so the Afghan War in the 1980s--with Christian troops supporting Muslim fundamentalists--prefigured World War III, which we are engaged in today. All the forces at war in this new conflict were already there, in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Progressive lay forces (led by a Communist Party), with the support of the Soviet Union, carried out a series of reforms in Afghanistan--introducing land reform, a secular public school system, and gender equality, with extensive participation of women in the schools and universities). All of these moves were opposed by the dominant classes of Afghanistan, which supported Islamic fundamentalist groups funded by Saudi Arabia (among the most oppressive regimes in the Arab world), the government of Pakistan, and the U.S. government (led by President Carter, who, paradoxically, presented himself as the great defender of human rights). It was at that time that the U.S. government supported Osama bin Laden in a holy war against communism, which in fact was a crude defense of the class interests of dominant groups whose privileges were threatened by social reforms. As it turned out, the Islamic fundamentalist forces, armed by the U.S. and other governments, developed a dynamic of their own that the U.S. government could not control. But the conflict that now exists between the U.S., U.K., and other governments and the Islamic fundamentalist terrorist groups should not obscure the origins of these terrorist movements and the class interests they have served and continue to serve.

**Vicente Navarro** is Professor of Public Policy at the Johns Hopkins University, U.S.A., and of Political Sciences in the Pompeu Fabra University, Spain. His

acclaimed essay on Salvador Dali and Franco's Spain is included in [Serpents in the Garden](#) edited by Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair.