Chapter Four

Religion, Human Rights and Political Conflicts

The Significance of 11 September 2001

The destruction of the Twin Towers in New York City was a watershed in the relationship between Islam and the West. For the first time since Pearl Harbor, the United States of America was attacked on its own soil. At the height of its triumph, ten years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States suffered on its home ground the threat it had so long guarded against. How did this occur? Why so many innocent deaths? What were the global implications? Are we heading towards a clash of civilizations between the West and Islam?

The answer to these questions is to be found in many controversial issues: from the interpretation of globalization and modernization, to secularism and fundamentalism, from war to global terrorism.

1. The Destruction of the Twin Towers – a Clash of Civilizations?

According to Huntington, the key feature of our age is a ‘clash of civilizations’ (Huntington 1993, 1996). From fault line conflicts we are hurtling towards a clash between entire civilizations and, in particular, between Islam and the West. The destruction of the Twin Towers could portend the demise of the culture and the power of the West. Furthermore, there are other conflicts over identity that question the capacity of policies of cultural integration to succeed (i.e. the Balkans, the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, the war between the Chechens and Russians). The clash of civilizations is ongoing, on the local and regional levels as well as between cultures and religions.

While no other theory of globalization seems to have so much empirical evidence on its side, a closer examination of events brings to light interesting questions and issues which Huntington’s theory fails...
to explain. The destruction of the Twin Towers was not the act of a state that was hegemonic within a specific culture, but the deed of a scattered force – organized in different states and territories. According to Huntington’s theory, the conflict should be led by the state exerting hegemony in each civilization. So, paradoxically, his theory is simultaneously confirmed and denied: the Islamic fundamentalists feel involved in a Holy War against the West, but they do not represent a state and they are not (at least apparently) a hegemonic force in their own world; the United States of America does not feel (at least apparently) involved in a Holy War against Islam and furthermore, at present, it is not only the hegemonic state in the West but of the entire world.

The nature of ‘Holy War’ or of ‘clash of civilizations’ is usually denied by Western politicians (although G.W. Bush has wavered on this point) and by commentators. The attack on the Twin Towers has been defined as an ‘act of war’ but has firmly been rejected as a clash of civilizations. Yet, such a declaration seems inadequate for more than one reason. In fact, the personal intentions alone of one or more actors involved cannot define the meaning of certain events. Consequently, we must accept the ambivalence of the current situation: the subjects involved define the situation in a way consistent with their own political project. The Muslims, calling their struggle a jihad, tend to attract Muslim believers; the United States of America, defining the actions of Islamic fundamentalists as terrorist, can build a broad-based interfaith alliance, and, by such a token, isolate and defeat what they call ‘Islamic terrorism’. Therefore, it seems necessary to better understand the strategic significance of the destruction of the Twin Towers.

For the sake of convenience, we have to reduce the field to two fronts: the Islamic and Western, each of which is internally fractured. For the symbolic status of the targets hit (the Twin Towers and the Pentagon), the attack takes on the sense of a challenge to Western civilization and, in particular, to its leading nation. The effects of this action produce a strategic restructuring of the Western field; every

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2 Galli della Loggia (2001) notes, albeit with some regret, that the one being fought is indeed a war of religion, or at least a war with a religious background. Staunchly opposed to the ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis is E. Said (1978 and 2001), according to whom, we are facing instead a clash of ignorances of all those who are not familiar with the situation and ignore the existence of intermediate positions, indulging in hypotheses (such as the clash of civilizations) that are simplistic and untenable. Even T. Friedman (2000 and 2002) is skeptical of the idea of a ‘clash of civilizations’.