Can We Avoid A Clash of Civilizations?

If we are going to discuss Islamic fundamentalism a good place to start is Christian fundamentalism. It is actually more demanding to be a Christian fundamentalist than an Islamic one. You are only allowed one wife, you should probably live in poverty (“It is easier for a rich man to go through the eye of a needle than to enter heaven”) and you should be non-violent (“Turn the other cheek”). Moreover you should regard all human life as intrinsically sacred, which means whilst opposing abortion, one is also against capital punishment and, as the early Christians thought, warfare.

What present day American Christian fundamentalists concentrate on seems only a half-lit portion of the true picture. They are tough on sex and alcohol (though there is not much in the Gospels about either of them, apart from the account of Jesus’ presence at the wedding feast of some family friends in Canaan which seems to record a good boozy celebration). But they are totally unchristian-like about gun ownership, capital punishment, war making, atonement and forgiveness.

Compared with Christian fundamentalism, contemporary Islamic fundamentalism is almost licentious – many wives and any number of divorces are permitted (although Mohammed thought divorces probably upset God). Young unmarried couples in fundamentalist Iran can even get a license from a Shi’ite imam for a night or two of passion, even for longer, a trial marriage, not to mention, according to some local religious authorities, promises of multiple wives in the life beyond it they sacrifice their lives in the cause of the jihad. (But what is the increasing number of female suicide bombers promised?)

At the other end of the spectrum of human existence, the spiritual, Christendom had no reason to be surprised at the outcry that followed the publication of the Danish newspaper cartoon drawing of Mohammed with his turban pierced with a bomb. Iconoclasm – the destruction of the figurative depiction of God and his prophets – was one of the important factors that in the ninth century strengthened the split between Roman Catholicism and Byzantine Orthodoxy. In fact the iconoclastic movement of the Eastern Church was in part a sympathetic reaction to the puritanical values of Islam. Later the Reformation led to similar moves against Catholic practices with fundamentalist
Protestants stripping out of their churches images of Mary and the saints, and the crucifix became bodiless.

Islamic fundamentalists, unsurprisingly, can be found across the religious spectrum in every country where Muslims congregate, although many Western observers attribute its centre of gravity to Wahhabism, the rigid Islamic brand of Sunni Islam prevalent in Saudi Arabia. Christian fundamentalism also spreads its wings. It may have deep roots in southern Baptist Churches in America, but President George W. Bush is a fundamentalist Methodist and Pope Benedict, who remains unmov ing and unshakeable on birth control, abortion, capital punishment and is against most wars – at least he is relatively consistent – is head of the Roman Catholic Church and regards himself as a Thomist scholar not a fundamentalist.

It ought to be easier to decide who and what is right in Islamic fundamentalism than Christian. Islam after all is the faith of a single text, but Christianity has many, including four rather different versions of the life of Jesus, a record of the letters and missionary work of St Paul and a final work of apocalyptic prophecy announcing the imminent end of the world and the Second Coming of the Messiah. (It is another of many ironies that Jewish fundamentalists extend a warm embrace to the American fundamentalists who support ultra Zionism, despite the fact that their belief in the Second Coming, if it came about, would involve the end of Judaism.)

Given the plethora of texts and the fact that Christianity is a religion riven with many denominations and sects, not to mention its complicated formulations of God not being just one but three, one might assume that one might expect more harmony in Islam. Indeed Islam is a more austere monotheism. But it is not particularly harmonic – the religion of the single text and single God is riven too. It is also, along with Judaism, the more violent of the original traditions.

We have no alternative but to go back to the beginning if we are to have a hope of understanding the despair and anger that burst on the world with the demolition of the twin towers of New York’s World Trade Centre by the suicide pilots of the “fundamentalist” Al Qaeda movement on September 11, 2001. This will not give us all the answers to all our questions. Nevertheless, this is the only way to start. Otherwise we fall into the trap set by ignoring history as George W. Bush and Tony Blair have done: of entering a drama that is already in its fifth or sixth act but assuming they were somehow at the beginning. Undoubtedly at the moment there is something of a “clash of civilizations” but to conclude that this has a long unbroken pedigree is a serious misreading of the history of the two religions. And to project it into the future as a development already determined by the past is to base an argument on the emotions of the moment, not reason. There is nothing inevitable about it at all.