



Political Islam Online

East v. West

By: Raouf Ebeid - Editor

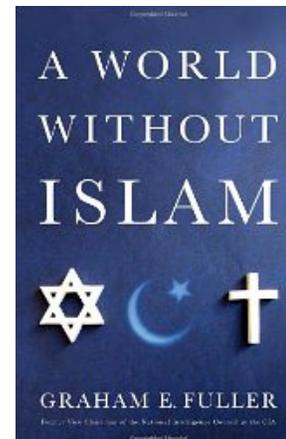
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A World without Islam

Graham E. Fuller

Book Analysis and Commentary

During the mid nineties, Samuel Huntington popularized the term “clash of civilizations”. After 9/11, the term became most closely associated with the conflict between Islam and the Western World. In a new book, *A World without Islam*, Graham fuller expands on a theory he first presented in 2008 that the roots of that conflict do not lay in Islamic ideology. Fuller presents an historical analysis to demonstrate that the clash between Islam and the West is the result of regional and territorial power struggles rather than religious ideological differences between Islam and Western culture. He surmises that, even if the prophet Muhammad had never started Islam in the seventh century, there would still be a clash between East and West, but with the united Christian Churches of the East replacing Islam as the West’s adversary. According to Fuller, historically there have been many East-West conflicts, rivalries and crises that were the product of a wide variety of factors, including ethnicity, nationalism, greed, and control over resources. Fuller points out that, in fact, Christians in the Middle East played a major role in the development of recent national anti-colonial movements, citing examples such as Michel Aflaq, a Syrian Christian who was instrumental in forming the socialist Baath party to combat the West. Thus, Fuller surmises that, even if the prophet Muhammad had never started Islam in the seventh century, the clash between East and West would have existed today, with the Christian Churches of the East replacing Islam as the West’s adversary. While not totally absolving Islam, Fuller lays most of the blame for these conflicts on the expansionist colonial powers going all the way back to the time of the crusades.



There is certainly merit in the notion that the clash between Islam and the West arose more from power struggles woven into the fabric of a complex history than a religious ideological divide. Most anti-colonial movements, while supported by indigenous religious establishments (be it Moslem or Christian), were secular in nature. Thus, even if religion were removed from the equation, conflicts would still exist between the East and the West. Fuller’s analysis, however, draws almost exclusively from an analysis of the distant past. When he touches upon the present, it is always to observe Muslims living in predominantly Christian or other non-

Muslim controlled countries, like Western Europe, China and India. Fuller offers little analysis of how the Eastern Christian churches of the Middle East currently interact with Islam and the West. *PI Online* therefore attempts to examine Fuller's theory, taking into account the role of these Eastern Churches vis-à-vis both the West and Islam, and how sectarianism and nationalism, rather than Christianity, shaped the political position of the Eastern Christian churches.



It is true that in today's world, the leaders of the Eastern churches, be it Copt, Greek or Armenian, in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria or Palestine, rarely side with the West. Their interests in maintaining power govern their actions more than ideology. During the latest Lebanese elections, for example, the Greek and Armenian orthodox population in Lebanon sided with Hizbullah and against the Maronite Christians, a rival group perceived as maintaining allegiance to the West and to Rome. Many Copts in the diaspora, mostly in the U.S., Australia and Canada, who complain about the Egyptian regime, are often reprimanded by the Coptic Orthodox church in Cairo. While the reaction of the Orthodox Church may be attributable in part to a desire to appease the Egyptian authorities, that fact does not fully explain the church's strong opposition towards Israel and contempt for the West, which is also deeply rooted in extreme nationalistic tendencies. Actually, the Coptic orthodox Pope *Shenouda* has much more interaction with his Muslim counterparts at Al-Azhar than with the leadership of the other Christian minority communities in Egypt, be it Catholic or Protestant.

When Western Observers blame the perceived backwardness of countries in the Middle East on Islam, they are most often ignorant of, or selectively silent about, the behavior of the Eastern Orthodox churches in Arab countries, most notably Egypt, which has the largest Christian population in the region. The church exerts a powerful control over its followers through rigid rituals involving marriages and divorces and has been accused of backward practices laced with mysteries and superstition. Recent events provide a tragic illustration. A Coptic woman married to a priest was alleged to have converted to Islam in order to obtain a divorce. Divorce is forbidden by the church except in cases of adultery and the fundamental freedom to change one's faith is absent or very limited in all countries in the Middle East region. Considering it an internal church matter, the Coptic Pope personally interceded and the woman was handed over to the Church by the authorities and whisked away to a monastery. Muslim fundamentalists would never accept that a Muslim woman could convert to Christianity, an offense punishable by death and Christian men cannot marry a Moslem woman in Egypt, without first converting to Islam. Nevertheless, the radicals were enraged by the actions of the Coptic Orthodox Church, believing the woman was held against her will and accusing Pope *Shenouda* for instigating inter-communal discord. Riots broke out around Egypt, but the repercussions did not stop there – the incident tragically reverberated across the Middle East. Yesterday, citing the incident in Egypt as the reason, Al-Qaeda in Iraq demanded that the Coptic Orthodox Church releases the woman and in the process slaughtered over fifty people in a Syrian *Catholic* church in Baghdad. These two different sects and Churches, who



were always separated by a myriad of doctrinal differences, were suddenly united in horror. Al Qaeda members obviously did not understand or care either about the difference between sects or rites.

Accountable to the Egyptian president for the Copts' behavior, the Coptic Pope is allowed wide powers over his Coptic community in exchange for keeping the flock under control. This entente between the Pope and the state has however been crumbling lately. There is no doubt that some of the fanaticism of the Coptic Orthodox Church can be considered a natural reaction to the rise of an equally fanatical Islam. That does not, however, fully explain the power the Church wields over its congregation, down to the details and rituals of daily life, which often exceeds the power of the Islamic clerics over Muslims. This is much like when, in the fifteenth century, the Ottomans conquered Greece and the Sultan gave the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church the broad powers over his people in exchange for maintaining order within the Greek Orthodox community.

The current attitude of the Eastern Churches in the Arab world appears to support Fuller's assertion that even in a world without Islam; it is likely there would be a clash between East and West. Fuller's conclusion that Eastern Christian churches would unite in a monolithic movement against the West is, however, highly questionable. The origins of the division between Eastern and Western churches are found mainly in the schism following the division of the Roman Empire. While the Eastern churches originally depended on the patriarchate of Constantinople, it is nationalism cloaked in theology that is the source of their views, pride and loyalty. They are not organized as a unified body and there is little communion across national boundaries. There is, after all, little affinity between the Greek, Russian, Syriac, Armenian and Coptic Orthodox churches. Interestingly, even the Eastern Catholic churches of the Middle East, most of which were formed by Catholic missionaries who converted these small minorities from orthodoxy during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, continued to conduct mass in their native languages and rites rather than adopt the Latin rites of Rome. Each of these churches is also headed by its own patriarch, who is often insulated from Rome, acting independently as a sort of mini-papacy.

A two-week synod of the Catholic Eastern churches just concluded in Rome on October 24th in which six Catholic Eastern churches demonstrated how independent they were. While technically in communion with the Apostolic See and in union with one another, during the synod each of the Patriarchs asked for their roles as head of their respective communities to be expanded at the expense of Rome's authority. Also, demonstrating how politics and nationalism take precedence over ecclesiastical issue in the Middle East, the synod's final communiqué specifically took a jab at Israel by declaring that, "recourse to theological and biblical position which uses the word of God to wrongly justify injustices is not acceptable". Bishop Cyril Bustros of the Greek Melkite Eparchy elaborated further by stating that the concept of a "promised land" cannot be used "to justify the return of Jews to Israel and the expatriation of Palestinians". The Vatican immediately drew fire from the Israeli government for turning the synod into a "forum for political attacks".

Animosity is not universal, or identifiable with all of Eastern orthodoxy, all of Islam, or all of the Western or the Eastern world. Nor can animosity be tied to a particular civilization. There is actually very little consensus, except within broad parameters, of what constitutes a “civilization”. Therein lies the problem, much less with Fuller than with Huntington. Even Huntington recognizes that the term “civilization” is subjective. Western civilization after all also embodies many of the eastern philosophies of the Greeks, and the world wars of the twentieth century were fought among those of the same civilization. Thus, the term “clash of civilizations” has little useful analytical application.

For most experts, it is very difficult to conceive of the Russian, Greek and Egyptian Orthodox finding common ground to unite them in a religious conflict against the West. The cultural divide between them would be too vast to overcome. Even the Egyptian and Ethiopian Copts, with almost identical religious beliefs, could not remain united, going their separate ways in the nineteen seventies. The same is in fact true of Islam, which is no more monolithic than Christianity. Fuller’s monolithic view of various religions is therefore a fundamental flaw.

Certainly religion is often used to arouse the masses and define and target the enemy. It is rarely the true reason behind confrontation, however. Obtaining and maintaining power has most often been the true source of conflicts and it is likely to remain so.

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