Globalization, the American Empire, and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

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Over a decade has passed since the American writer Francis Fukuyama advanced his thesis that we were witnessing the 'end of history', that is, the end point of humankind's ideological evolution. 'Democratic capitalism', he argued, constituted the 'final form of human government'; its global reach meant nothing less than 'the triumph of the Western idea'. He saw a 'Universal History' evolving in the direction of 'liberal democracy'.[1]

When Fukuyama first advanced his thesis there seemed good reason to take him seriously. The communist bloc, for so long seen as a threat to the Western democratic way of life, disintegrated in 1989 to the point of impotence. The Cold War no longer prevailed and the U.S.A. reigned supreme as the world's only superpower. The American democratic ideals of individualism and unfettered economic activity in a global free market, so it seemed, would now also reign supreme. Powered by technological drive and innovation, these values seemed unstoppable. But as the danger from communism faded, new threats emerged. The liberal democratic ideal was not universally embraced. Instead, old rivalries surfaced, and bitter conflicts erupted in the Balkans and in Central Asia. History seemed far from ended. Indeed, the new age of *Pax Americana* encountered great resistance. First, there was the Gulf War of 1991 which garnered Saddam Hussein considerable popular support among Muslims in general (although less so among Muslim governments). Then there was a civil war in eastern Europe which had saw Christians pitted against Muslims. In southern Asia increasing tension grew between India and Pakistan which occasionally triggered battles in Kashmir. The situation in the modern world was becoming ever more paradoxical: on the one hand there was unprecedented economic integration and cultural homogenization; on the other unrelenting cultural and religious factionalism. But were these trends as contradictory as they appeared? Might it be that cultural and religious wars and rivalries actually result from globalization and its homogenizing power? For, contrary to expectations, the *Pax Americana* has not made the world a

safer place in which to live (and, as September 11, 2001 has shown, America itself is very vulnerable to attack). Just why the world seems to be growing more anti-Western and more fractious than ever finds a widely endorsed answer in Samuel Huntington's thesis about the 'the clash of civilizations'.

The Clash of Civilizations?

Samuel P. Huntington's now famous essay, "The Clash of Civilizations?" was first published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993. He then expanded it into a book.[2] Endorsed by the American media in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, the 'clash of civilizations' thesis became the watchword of public discourse. Huntington suggests a new global paradigm that he believes casts new light on the new global situation. The era of struggles between nation-states and rival ideologies is over, he says. The new conflicts, he insists, are between civilizations. Huntington lists seven or eight civilizations: Sinic, Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Western, Latin American, Slavic-Orthodox, and 'possibly African'.[3] Characteristically, they have different languages, histories, institutions and, most importantly, different religions. These are differences which are more basic than the old differences of politics or ideologies. Huntington claims that increasing interaction among people of different civilizations is enhancing the historical 'civilization–consciousness' of peoples in ways that 'invigorate' differences and animosities.

This view challenges the usual and more irenic perception to the effect that increasing contact tends to decrease tensions. Today, more than ever, people from different parts of the world not only buy and sell each other's goods, but they also enjoy each other's music, films and TV shows, fashions and food. Whenever they have the opportunity, many are eager to travel to far-away countries, to meet foreign people, and sometimes even to intermarry.[4] But Huntington counters this with a telling assertion: 'The forces of integration in the world which are real are precisely what are generating counterforces of cultural assertion and civilization consciousness.'[5] In other words, increasing contact and awareness is also increasing inter-civilizational intolerance and strife, rather than decreasing it. Civilizations, Huntington tells us, are the broadest level of cultural identity that people have. The modern world, he claims, has created cultural identity crises among the various civilizations. In short: 'In coping with identity crisis, what counts for people are blood and belief, faith and family. People rally to those with similar ancestry, religion,

language, values and institutions, and distance themselves from those with different ones.'[6] He goes on—

> The collapse of communism exacerbated this discordance by reinforcing in the West the view that its ideology of democratic liberalism had triumphed globally and hence was universally valid....[people in] the United States, which has always been a missionary nation, believe that the non-western peoples should commit themselves to the Western values of democracy, free markets, limited government, human rights, individualism, the rule of law, and should embody these values in their institutions...[but] What is universalism to the West is imperialism to the rest.[7]

This brings us to the heart of the matter: what people in the West see is not necessarily the same 'reality' as what is seen in the non-Western world. What is termed 'Globalization' in the West is called 'imperialism' by 'the rest', that is, by those in the non-Western world. If there is one thing which emerges from Huntington's thesis, then, it is that we must attend to the perspective of 'the rest' if we are to understand global tensions.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

We will actually gain more insight into our situation in the twenty-first century from what appears at first to be a most unlikely source: the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. The Book of Revelation was not, of course, written with the twenty-first century in mind. It was written somewhere around the end of the first century C.E. for a Christian audience. Yet what it says about the Roman Empire of the lst century is remarkably relevant to the situation of the American Empire in the twenty-first century.

The book of Revelation is a notoriously difficult book to interpret. Its rich and evocative imagery has served as a source of inspiration for many different kinds of people, but especially for religious fanatics who see in it literal prophecies of the future.[8] There is, of course, much in Revelation purporting to tell us what is going to happen, but to understand the book we must take our cue from the very beginning sentence: 'The revelation of Jesus Christ' (Rev. 1:1). The book claims to reveal that which was hidden so that the readers may have a completely different perspective from their own. The book of Revelation reassures the faithful by showing that there is another dimension to existence. Humans, being

mired in the quotidian world, are unable to see what is real. But through the divine revelation which the author claims to have received, he is able to unmask and lay bare the reality behind conventional society. The rich and powerful, who support and condone the oppressive and exploitative structures in society, are condemned, while those who are exploited and oppressed are offered hope. The book of Revelation is, says Christopher Rowland, 'an ancient Christian form of the critique of ideology'.[9] It is not about predicting the future but rather, says Rowland, it is about the state of affairs in the present. Revelation 'unmasks' or 'tears off disguises'. Its unusual and sometimes bizarre imagery is an attempt to offer a critique of conventional wisdom and its values.

An illuminating passage for our purposes is the passage about the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse. It reads—

> Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, "Come!" I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow, a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer. When he opened the second seal I heard the second living creature call out "Come!" And out came another horse, bright red, its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword. When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, "Come!" I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what appeared to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, 'A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine! When he opened the fourth seal I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, "Come!" I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider's name was death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth (Rev. 6:1-8 RSV).

When the first of the seven seals of the scroll is opened, a rider is summoned forth riding a white horse with a bow in his hand. After he is given a crown he comes out 'conquering and to conquer' that is, 'to conquer even more' (Rev. 6:2). The image is clearly meant to refer to the Roman Empire, which was all powerful militarily. (White is a symbol of victory). The horseman is, moreover,

given a crown before he rides out. The intimidating thing about the Roman Empire was that it seemed invincible. For those who opposed the Empire this was a reality with which they had to come to terms. The image of the first horseman thus emphasizes the military power behind Roman imperialism.

The opening of the second seal produces another rider on a bright red horse who is given a huge sword. He is to 'take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another' (Rev. 6:4). This horseman symbolizes war. There is a note of irony in saying that he takes peace from the earth. The Romans considered one of their greatest achievements was the establishment of the *Pax Romana* after the civil war had ended in 29 B.C.E. But from the point of view of those who were exploited by the Empire and opposed it, this was not a real peace. It was an imposed peace. It was imposed by the Romans on those unable to resist them.

When the third seal is opened it produces a rider on a black horse and holding a pair of scales. A voice says, 'A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay' (Rev. 6:6). Black symbolizes economic misfortune, and this is emphasized by the high price of wheat and barley. The scenario conjured up is that of a severe shortage of essential food which has driven prices so high that the ordinary worker is reduced to subsistence level. Moreover, this has been brought about by mismanagement, clearly illustrated by the voice which ironically says, 'But do not damage the olive oil and the wine!' Luxury items such as olive oil and wine are available (for the rich) but essential foodstuffs (for the poor) are scarce. The wealthy enjoy the economic prosperity of the Empire, but the poor do not. The symbol of the third horseman is thus making a similar point to that of the second. The *Pax Romana* benefits the rich and powerful; it does not benefit the exploited. The prosperity of the Empire benefits the rich and powerful; it does not benefit the poor and dispossessed.

The fourth seal is opened and out comes a pale green horse. The rider is called 'Death', and 'Hades' comes with him. 'They' are then given 'authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth' (Rev. 6:8). The fourth horseman symbolizes a different calamity from the first three. The Greek word which is used for 'green' is used to refer to the colour of grass and other vegetation.[10] The fourth horseman symbolizes ecological catastrophe. The Romans have destroyed a quarter of

the earth as their political dominance and economic exploitation has devastated nature. The apparently odd and redundant phrase 'and the wild animals of the earth' (Rev. 6:8d) should therefore probably be seen in conjunction with the evocation of grass and vegetation. Plagues and roaming wild animals are symbols of the lethal forces of nature which are unleashed by the Empire's repression and oppression.[11]

The four horsemen thus represent a very powerful symbolic critique of the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire's military might enables it to exploit and oppress economically, causing devastation both in the human and in the natural world. It is very tempting to argue that a similar critique could be applied to the American Empire of the twenty-first century. But while there certainly are parallels, they are inexact ones. The term 'Empire' does not really apply to the American hegemony in the world today in the same way as it did to the Roman governance of the Mediterranean region in the first century. The hegemony implied in the use of the term 'American Empire' is a dominance which has come through technological superiority.[12] 'The Romans achieved dominance through military conquest. Although America is quite willing to use force to protect its own interests (almost always economic) it does not rule over foreign territories by force in the same way that the Roman Empire did. And while what America sees as globalization 'the rest' might see as imperialism, it is an imperialism of ideology, not an imperialism of military conquest.

What is illuminating about the passage from Revelation is not that it suggests parallels between the Roman Empire and the American Empire, but rather that it shows how war, economics, and power are interconnected. Moreover, it illustrates perfectly the significance of different perspectives. For the rich and established, the *Pax Romana* meant peace. For the dispossessed and exploited, it meant resignation and oppression. For the rich and powerful the economic boom during the first century of the Roman Empire meant prosperity. For the poor and marginalized, it meant desolation and despair. These are perspectives which are as relevant today as they were in the first century. Furthermore, Revelation sees that the economic prosperity of the Empire came at a terrible price for the natural world. That this was the case is fully documented by Donald Hughes, who explains how huge areas were deforested, many species of animals were wiped out, and water and air pollution were serious problems.[13] The ecological price of globalization and capitalism in the twenty-

first century is similarly very high. Western economic prosperity is ecological impoverishment. As Cynthia D. Moe Lobeda argues in *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God*, the prevailing model of globalization widens the gap between the wealthy and the rest of humanity, assaults the earth's life support systems, and jeopardizes cultural diversity.[14]

Conclusion

Huntington's assertion that the fault lines of the modern world are civilizational, fails to take adequate account of the stresses which cut across civilizational boundaries and which are caused by globalization. Much of the violent reaction to the West which we have seen recently is fueled by rage against the injustices and barrenness of the materialistic, corporately governed, liberal state.[15] The Book of Revelation also makes the point vividly that there cannot be a real peace if there is no justice. In order to see injustice for what it is, we must tear away 'the mask' of conventional wisdom. The analyses of such as Fukuyama and Huntington are sorely lacking in this respect. They do not see beyond their own limited cultural and philosophical perspective. From their perspective, the forces of globalization, which are powered by American corporate capitalism and the uncompromising belief in the individual, seem invincible and unstoppable. Resistance is explained away by referring to 'civilizational clashes'. The Book of Revelation, however, gives us a different story. The military might and economic power of the Roman Empire also seemed invincible in its day. But Revelation asseverates that there is another perspective: that of the marginalized and oppressed. In a major eschatological reversal, Revelation proclaims that the voice of the marginalized is also the voice of God. God demands that we see where there is injustice and exploitation. We should not be taken in by the allure of the quotidian world. We must see beyond it. The new Jerusalem (Rev. 21–22) is a city which is not founded on injustice and exploitation. It stands in stark contrast to the city of Rome (symbolized in the text by the city of Babylon). Barbara Rossing says—

> New Jerusalem is the antithesis of toxic Babylon/Rome's imperialism, violence, unfettered commerce, and injustice. The essentials of life are given 'without money,' as a gift, even to those who cannot pay for them. Babylon's idolatrous liturgy of buying and selling is replaced by the saints' hymns of praise in the New Jerusalem, where all God's people are priests and share in ruling with God and with the lamb.[16]

Revelation thus calls upon Christians to listen to the voice from the margins, from the periphery of society, and to fix their eyes on the new Jerusalem. It is a profound ideological critique which has great relevance for today.

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ENDNOTES

1. F. Fukuyama, "The End of History," *The National Interest* 16 (1989), pp. 4, 8.
2. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72 (1993), pp. 22-49; *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
3. *The Clash of Civilizations*, pp. 45-7.
4. David R. Loy, "The West against the Rest?" in *The Twenty-first Century Confronts its Gods* (New York: SUNY, 2004), p. 97.
5. *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 36.
6. *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 126.
7. *The Clash if Civilizations*, p. 183f.
8. See, e.g., Hal Lindsey, *Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).
9. Christopher Rowland, *Radical Christianity: A Reading of Recovery* (Maryknoll: NY: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 75.
10. David E. Aune, (Word Biblical Commentary) Vol. 52b: *Revelation 6-16* (Dallas, Texas: Word Book Publishers, 1998), p. 400.
11. Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), p. 69.
12. See George Grant, *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1974).
13. See J. Donald Hughes, *Ecology in Ancient Civilizations* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1975) and *Pan's Travail: Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans* (Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press, 1994).
14. Cynthia D. Moe Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), pp. l9ff.
15. Cf. Dieter Senghaas, "A Clash of Civilizations-An *Idee Fixe*?" *Journal of Peace Research* 35, No. 1 (1998), p. 130: 'Cultural, and as a rule, religious factors, are rarely of great relevance at the very beginning of a conflict escalation. Socio-economic problems with no prospect of a solution are more important.'
16. Barbara R. Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), p. 144.