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Mendus, Susan (2008) *The Freilich Lectures 2007: Religious Toleration in an Age of Terrorism*. Freilich Foundation, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia. (ISBN 978-0-646-50185-7)

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Lecture 4: A Clash of Civilizations?

Lecture 4

A Clash of Civilizations?

At the end of the last lecture, I concurred with those who insist on the centrality of terror to any analysis of terrorism. It is, I agreed, the attempt to instil fear that serves in no small part to distinguish terrorism from other kinds of murderous and bloody acts. However, even if we agree that fear is central to any analysis of terrorism, it is still important to know what the fear is a fear of, and here I noted Jessica Stern's claim that the fear may be the fear that our entire system of values (the values of western liberal democracy) are under attack. To recall her claim: 'the terrorism we face is not only a response to political grievances, as was common in the 1960s and 1970s, and which might in principle be remediable. It is a response to a "God-shaped hole" in modern culture'. Stern's analysis is reminiscent of Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis. It suggests that the reason modern terrorism is not remediable in principle is because we are no longer dealing with actors who seek political remedy, but rather with actors who seek to undermine the entire value system (the civilization) of which we, in western liberal democracies, are a part.

In this final lecture I will first say a bit more about what the 'clash of civilizations' thesis is, and I will then ask whether the thesis is one which really does - as is sometimes alleged - destroy the possibility of toleration and peaceful co-

existence. The pattern of argument here is very similar to the pattern I have deployed in previous lectures: in the first lecture I noted the widespread belief that salvationist conceptions of religion are incompatible with toleration, but in the second lecture I tried to show that, in fact, this widespread belief is false and that salvationist conceptions of religion are (or at least can be) compatible with toleration. Belief in one true God does not necessarily destroy the possibility of toleration. Or so I argued. Similarly here, I will first say why the 'clash of civilizations' thesis is thought to be incompatible with toleration, and I will then try to show that it can, after all, accommodate toleration. In both cases, the solution lies, I believe, in learning from our history, and especially from the history of political thought. So, in the first case, explaining how salvationist religion might be compatible with toleration involved looking back to 17th century England and to the work of John Locke; in this case, showing how the clash of civilizations thesis is compatible with toleration involves looking back to 16th century Florence and to the work of Niccolo Machiavelli. I begin, however, by saying a bit more about what the clash of civilizations thesis is and why it is thought to render religious toleration and peaceful co-existence impossible, or at least extremely difficult.

The Clash of Civilizations

Samuel Huntington's thesis was first advanced in his 1993 article 'A Clash of Civilizations?' and then elaborated in his 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. The thesis is succinctly stated by Huntington himself when, in the original article, he writes:

The fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. *The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.* (Huntington, 1993, p.22, emphasis added).

And it is clear that, for Huntington, ‘civilizations’ are in large part distinguished religiously. So the clash of civilizations is (or will be) the clash of religions. More accurately, it will be (or is) the clash between, as the slogan has it, ‘the West and the Rest’. And in speaking of ‘the Rest’ Huntington is thinking mainly (though not exclusively) of Islam.

The “clash of civilizations” thesis has been controversial and influential in equal measure. Huntington has been ‘credited’ with predicting the rise of religious terrorism that has characterized the 21st century, but he has also been accused of having a ‘foggy’ perception of world history, a ‘vague’ notion of what counts as a civilization, and a ‘reckless’ attitude towards serious problems of modern politics. Thus, with thinly veiled contempt, Edward Said writes:

Huntington is an ideologist, someone who wants to make “civilizations” and “identities” into what they are not: shut-down, sealed-off entities that have been purged of the myriad currents and counter-currents that animate human

history, and that over centuries have made it possible for that history not only to contain wars of religion and imperial conquest but also to be one of exchange, cross-fertilization, and sharing. This far less visible history is ignored in the rush to highlight the ludicrously compressed and constricted warfare that the “clash of civilizations” argues is the reality. (Said, 2001)

And in similar vein, the Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen comments:

The increasing tendency to overlook the many identities that any human being has and to try to classify human beings according to a single allegedly pre-eminent religious identity is an intellectual confusion that can animate dangerous divisiveness Huntington contrasts Western civilization with “Islamic civilization”, “Hindu civilization”, “Buddhist civilization”, and so on. The alleged confrontations of religious differences are incorporated into a sharply carpentered vision of hardened divisiveness. (Sen, 2006)

Both Said and Sen discern in Huntington’s thesis an historical and ideological naiveté, which assumes that people are largely, and probably immutably, defined by their religion, and which ignores both the malleability of identities and the significance of factors other than religion (race, gender, ethnicity, class, language, and so on) in the creation of identities which are not monolithic but multi-faceted. To put the point bluntly: where Huntington sees the world and its people as deeply divided along religious lines, Said and Sen insist that religion is just one factor among many which contribute to our sense of who we are and where we belong.

Moreover, and crucially for my purposes, having put forward the ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis, Huntington goes on to assert that its political implications are such as to require the West to ‘maintain the economic and military power necessary to protect its interests in relation to these [other] civilizations’ (Huntington, 1993, p.49). In other words, we in the West must arm ourselves against other civilizations and ensure that we have the military and economic power to protect ourselves against them. As one reviewer has noted:

Though he denies it, the political implication of Huntington's thesis is isolationism His advice for the Western powers is to draw closer together, maintain their strength, and, above all, recognize "that Western intervention in the affairs of other civilizations is probably the single most dangerous source of instability and potential global conflict in a multicivilizational world" (Pipes, 1997, p. 64)

The clash of civilizations, then, enjoins separatism and isolationism.

This is, to put it mildly, a rather dispiriting conclusion and also, many have claimed, one that has served as something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: once people are encouraged to see conflicts as reflecting clashes of civilizations, permanent fault lines, or immutable allegiances to ultimate but conflicting religious convictions, then the prospects for coexistence seem pretty poor. It looks as if the best we can do is to batten down the hatches, arm ourselves against the enemy, and try to preserve what is valuable *to us*, while leaving ‘them’ to sort out their own affairs. Is that, then, what awaits us in a world post 9/11?

I want to suggest that it is not – or at least that it need not be. But I want to do that, not by denying the clash of civilizations thesis, but by accepting it and arguing that, even if it is true, there is still room for toleration and peaceful co-existence rather than the isolationism and separatism to which Huntington appears to be committed. So, just as I argued that even if we have salvationist religious convictions, toleration is still possible, so here I want to argue that even if the clash of civilizations thesis is true (which it may not be), toleration is still possible. The argument can best be made through an analysis of the work of a 16th century Florentine writer and politician - Niccolo Machiavelli.

Machiavelli

Comparatively little is known about Machiavelli's life, but the bare bones are that he was born in Florence in May of 1469, educated in the humanist tradition (which was the favoured education for aspiring politicians and which emphasised the study of Latin, rhetoric, ancient history, and moral philosophy), and subsequently appointed Second Chancellor of the Republic of Florence under the patronage of Piero Soderini. In his capacity as Second Chancellor, Machiavelli travelled extensively and rubbed shoulders with many of the great figures of his day, including Cesare Borgia, Louis XII, and members of the Medici family. However, in 1512 the Florentine republic was dissolved (or, more accurately, defeated), and the Medici returned to power. With the collapse of the Republic came the collapse of Machiavelli's political career. He was dismissed from his post, he spent some time in internal exile, he was then imprisoned for a period during which time he was tortured ('put to the question') and, on release

from prison, he retired to a small property at San Casciano on the outskirts of Florence. He never regained public office, though he fervently wished to do so, and he died on 22 June 1527.

There are two features of Machiavelli's life and times that I want to note here because they are, I think, important to an understanding of his work and to the interpretation of his work which I want to propose: the first, and most familiar, feature is that Machiavelli had considerable personal experience of politics. He knew how politics worked 'on the ground'; he knew how people came to power, how they retained power, and (most important of all) how they lost power. The second point is that Machiavelli's world was not only politically tumultuous but was also a world which lurched, rather unpredictably, between different moral, religious, and political extremes. As one commentator has put it: 'Florence [at the time of Machiavelli] was a city with two opposite currents of life, one directed by the fervent and austere Savonarola, the other by the splendour-loving Lorenzo [de Medici]' (Marriott, 2004). I will return to this quotation in a few moments.

What, then, of Machiavelli's work? Probably his most famous work is a short book called *The Prince*. The book was written in 1513-14 (after Machiavelli's fall from political office) and it is a book which has inspired hundreds of different interpretations. I will focus on two: the first is a very familiar (possibly even the standard) interpretation; the second is an interpretation which I think is more interesting (and more useful for my purposes) because it offers a way of explaining how the 'clash of civilizations' may be compatible with the rise of toleration.

Just to recap, then, my aim here is to show how, even if the clash of civilizations thesis is true, toleration may still be possible, and to do that via an interpretation of Machiavelli's *The Prince*. So, Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration*

enables us to see that toleration is possible even if there is one true God and salvation depends on doing what is pleasing to Him. Similarly, Machiavelli's *The Prince* enables us to see that toleration is possible even if the differences between 'the West and the Rest' constitute a clash of civilizations. (It does not, of course, follow that Machiavelli himself would welcome this implication of his theory.)

I will begin by outlining a very familiar interpretation of *The Prince* but, for reasons I have indicated, I am not going to dwell on that interpretation; it is here primarily for reasons of contrast. This, familiar, interpretation is an interpretation of Machiavelli as political realist.

Machiavelli as Political Realist

The Prince was written after Machiavelli's fall from political office and at time when he was trying to curry favour with the new ruler (the new prince). Indeed, it is offered as a piece of advice to a new ruler about how he should conduct himself if he wishes to retain office and to preside over a flourishing state. And the advice seems to be that, if he is to succeed in politics, the prince (ruler) must be prepared to act immorally. Although it is (of course) better if the prince acts honestly, kindly and decently, the world is such, Machiavelli says, that this will not always be possible and sometimes (perhaps often) rulers will be required to deceive, to be cruel, and to break their promises if they are to retain their positions as rulers.

Here are just a few extracts from *The Prince* which give the flavour of Machiavelli's position: 'a wise ruler cannot, nor ought he, to keep his promises when that may be turned against him, and when the reasons that caused him to make the promise no longer exist. If men were entirely good, this advice would not hold, but

because they are bad and will not keep faith with you, you too are not bound to keep faith with them'. Or again, 'it is necessary for a prince wishing to retain power to know how to do wrong and to make use of that knowledge as and when necessary'. And finally, 'one prince [Maximilian I, Holy Roman Emperor] of the present time never preaches anything but peace and good faith, and to both he is most hostile, and either, if he had kept it, would have deprived him of reputation and kingdom many a time' (Machiavelli, 1977).

This, then, is Machiavelli the realist, the thinker who, more than any other, recognises that if rulers mean to stay in power they must be prepared to be hypocritical, untrustworthy, ruthless, deceitful, and immoral. 'Politics' as Thomas Nagel has put it, 'selects for ruthlessness', and the claim that politicians must be ruthless is nowhere more stridently and uncompromisingly made than in the works of Machiavelli (Nagel, 1979). However, and as indicated, I don't want to dwell on that interpretation here because there is, I think, a more interesting interpretation of *The Prince*, one which does not focus on Machiavelli the political realist, but rather on Machiavelli the value pluralist. It is in Machiavelli's pluralism that we find the clash of civilizations thesis foreshadowed and its practical implications spelled out in ways that are illuminating for those of us who live in the world post 9/11. Or so I shall suggest.

Machiavelli and the Clash of Civilizations

In an article entitled 'The Question of Machiavelli' Isaiah Berlin notes that 'there is something peculiarly disturbing about what Machiavelli said or implied ... something that has caused profound and lasting uneasiness' through the ages. Many claim that

the unease is caused by Machiavelli's realism – by his belief (the belief identified a few moments ago) that politics demands ruthlessness, dishonesty, and duplicity, but Berlin doubts that this can be the full story. 'The fact that the wicked flourish' he says 'has never been very remote from the consciousness of mankind. The Bible, Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle ... all these had cast enough light on political realities to shock the credulous and naïve out of uncritical idealism' (Berlin, 1977, pp.206-207).

So, if it is not the realism, what is it that makes Machiavelli's views so alarming, disturbing and terrifying – so *erschreckend*, to use Berlin's word? The answer comes in two parts, both of which have implications for the central question of this lecture: the first part of the answer is that Machiavelli's views are disturbing because, in the end, he is not saying that, in order to be successful, the politician must be willing to do what is morally wrong. On the contrary, he is saying that when the politician lies, deceives, or cheats he is not abandoning morality in order to do what is politically necessary; he is in fact embracing a different, but no less compelling morality – the morality of politics itself. As Berlin explains: 'Machiavelli's values are not instrumental but moral and ultimate, and he calls for great sacrifices in their name The moral ideal for which he thinks no sacrifice is too great – the welfare of the *patria* (the homeland, the city) – is for him the highest form of social existence' (Berlin, 1977, p.216). In other words, the suggestion is that in pursuing the life of politics - in lying, deceiving, cheating, and acting ruthlessly - the politician does what is *morally* required by his calling. Of course this morality (the morality of politics) is different from and incompatible with ordinary (Christian) morality, but it is a morality nonetheless, not merely a pragmatic response to the vagaries of the world, nor merely

a strategy which the politician adopts in order to secure his own ambitious or self-centred ends.

This, then, is the first disturbing (*erschreckend*) feature of Machiavelli's account: it is an account according to which there may be more than one morality – more than one moral world: the politician (prince) has moral values quite distinct from, and often inconsistent with, the moral values of the private person, and it is therefore not true to say that the prince is morally bad and the private person morally good – or vice versa. What is true is that each kind of life has its own moral values, but they are different and indeed conflicting values. They cannot be combined in a single life, and therefore a choice must be made between them.

Additionally (and this is the second disturbing feature of Machiavelli's account) there may, ultimately, be no way of making a choice between them because, although they conflict one with another, each way of life, each set of values, 'has much, indeed everything'; to be said for it, so any choice will, of necessity, involve the loss of some value or values. There is no single best way of living. As Berlin puts it:

What has been shown by Machiavelli... is not that men profess one thing and do another (although no doubt he shows this, too) but that when they assume that the two ideals are compatible, or perhaps are even one and the same ideal, they are guilty of bad faith. Machiavelli calls the bluff not just of official morality – the hypocrisies of ordinary life – but of one of the foundations of the western philosophical tradition, the belief in the ultimate compatibility of all genuine values. His own withers are unwrung. He has made his choice. He

seems wholly unworried by, indeed scarcely aware of, parting company with traditional Western morality. (Berlin, 1977, p. 229)

So, what is disturbing about Machiavelli is his unflinching recognition that there are many different moral systems (many different moral worlds), that they are incompatible one with another, and that there is no way of choosing between them. No right answer to the question 'how should one live?'. And this does seem to be very close to the 'clash of civilizations' thesis. Of course, in Machiavelli it is not spelled out through the vocabulary of 'the West and the Rest', but conceptually it just is the claim that there are different, conflicting, and irreconcilable world views, and that there is no way of bringing them into harmony one with another.

Let me try to dramatize this point by returning to a quotation given earlier: 'Florence [at the time of Machiavelli] was a city with two opposite currents of life, one directed by the fervent and austere Savonarola, the other by the splendour-loving Lorenzo [de Medici]' (Marriott, 2004). Savonarola was a Dominican monk who was appalled by the ostentation and profligacy of the Medici court. During the carnival of 1497 he organized bonfires in the Piazza della Signoria on which the people of Florence were encouraged to burn their luxuries (vanities) and return to a more simple, frugal and god-fearing style of life. These were the bonfires of the vanities. They rose 15 storeys high and on them were burned all the baubles and trinkets and fripperies of Florentine decadence: mirrors, carnival masks, ornaments, cards, dice, perfume, cosmetics. And most of the paintings of Botticelli ...

The values of the Medici (ostentation, self-confidence, luxury) were in conflict with the values of Savonarola (simplicity, austerity, frugality, and humility). There was (and is) no way of reconciling these two sets of values, but neither is it true that

one set of values is entirely right and the other wrong. If we choose between them, as we must, then there will be loss either way. Without self-confidence, brashness, and ostentation, it is doubtful whether the great art of Renaissance Italy would have been possible. As Stuart Hampshire puts it:

The great civilizations of the past have not been created and sustained by quietly virtuous people with a delicate sense of justice. On the contrary, they have generally been the products, or by-products, of overweening ambition and a large appetite for power and glory. (Hampshire, 1989, p.161).

Or as Berlin puts :

If Machiavelli is right, if it is in principle (or in fact: the frontier seems dim) impossible to be morally good and do one's duty as this was conceived by common European, and especially Christian, ethics, and at the same time build Sparta or Periclean Athens, or the Rome of the Republic or even of the Antonines, then a conclusion of the first importance follows: that the belief that the correct, objectively valid solution to the question of how men should live can in principle be discovered is itself, in principle, not true. This was a truly *erschreckend* proposition. (Berlin, 1977, pp.224-225).

The point is the same: the 'quiet' virtues - virtues of humility, decency, and honesty - are not virtues that will build a great city or nurture a great civilization. For that, what is required is self-confidence, an appetite for power, and ambition. But self confidence and ambition are incompatible with humility and honesty. There is a clash

of values and when, as in 16th century Florence, ‘two opposite currents of life’ converge, there is something like a clash of civilizations. Which is simply to say: there is a clash of equally ultimate, equally compelling, yet incompatible moral worlds.

However, if all this is true – if values really are plural and conflicting in the deep way implied by this interpretation of Machiavelli, then what are the prospects for toleration and peaceful co-existence? Samuel Huntington seems to think that the prospects are gloomy, and (as noted earlier) major commentators such as Said and Sen agree, and are appalled. They – and Huntington – seem convinced that if the clash of civilizations thesis is true, then we are doomed to isolationism and separatism.

I find this deeply puzzling: it may well be true, as Said, Sen, and others allege, that Huntington has a very crude understanding of history and a simplistic notion of the many different factors that go to make up someone’s identity or sense of who they are, but insofar as his ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis is a thesis about the way in which values conflict and about the possibility that they may not, ultimately, be reconcilable one with another, it is the very starting point of liberal political philosophy and indeed of the commitment to toleration that has long been associated with it. John Rawls tells us that liberalism’s first question is ‘how is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical and moral doctrines?’ (Rawls, 1993, p.xviii) and, as we have seen, the historical origins of liberalism lie in the religious conflict which characterized 17th century Europe and which were ultimately resolved, not by the discovery of a single, ‘true’ answer, but by a recognition that, since disagreement and conflict were not going to go away, they should be contained through policies of toleration. In other words, Huntington’s insistence on the depth of disagreement that

divides 'the West' from 'the Rest' is not, in itself, troubling. On the contrary, it was the recognition of deep disagreement that gave us liberalism in the first place, and it is the acknowledgement (Rawls's acknowledgement) that that disagreement is not going to go away, that should reinforce our commitment to liberal values. They need not, and should not, encourage us to embrace isolationism and separatism. On the contrary, they should encourage us to look for ways in which we might secure peaceful co-existence and toleration.

Of course, people differ about the extent and depth of disagreement that is compatible with peaceful coexistence and toleration, but even if Machiavelli is right and the depth of difference is very great indeed, there is still no reason to be completely pessimistic. In the concluding sentences of 'The Question of Machiavelli' Berlin writes:

So long as only one ideal is the true goal, it will always seem to men that no means can be too difficult, no price too high, to do whatever is required to realize the ultimate goal. Such certainty is one of the great justifications of fanaticism, compulsion, persecution.... If there is only one solution to the puzzle, then the only problems are: first how to find it, then how to realize it, and finally how to convert others to the solution by persuasion or force. But if this is not so, then the path is open to pluralism and toleration. Toleration is the product of the realization of the irreconcilability of equally dogmatic faiths, and the practical improbability of complete victory of one over another. (Berlin, 1977, p. 235)

In an earlier lecture I argued that, in fact, the belief that there is a single right answer need not destroy the possibility of toleration. Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* shows us that, even for salvationist religious believers, toleration is both possible and desirable. This is the lesson to be learned from Locke. In this lecture, I have tried to show that the belief that there is not a single solution does not destroy the possibility toleration either. Rather, it provides the context within which problems of toleration are to be understood and addressed. Either way, though, toleration remains a viable option even though its grounds and limits might be different in the two cases. Let me now conclude.

Conclusion

There is an almost irresistible temptation to believe that 'everything changed' on 9/11 and that modern problems of religious violence and religiously-motivated terrorism are completely intractable and utterly different from anything hitherto experienced. It has been my aim in this series of lectures to suggest that that is not so. We have, in some extended sense, 'been here before', and we can learn, both practically and philosophically, from the ways in which problems similar to ours have been addressed in the past.

The Freilich Foundation exists for the study of, and research into, the causes, the histories and the effects of ethnic, cultural, religious and sexual bigotry and animosity, and the exploration of how such intolerance can be combated and peaceful coexistence promoted. In these lectures I have tried to say something about the role that philosophy in general, and the history of philosophy in particular, may play in

helping us to achieve these aims. It has been an honour and a pleasure to deliver the Freilich Eminent Lectures for 2007.