# The Clash of Civilizations or Global Civil Society?

**By David Blankenhorn**

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*As-Salamu Alaykum*. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to visit your beautiful country, and I am honored to be with you today in this distinguished hall of learning, and in this great center of religious faith and devotion. From my colleagues at the Institute for American Values in New York — about 100 scholars specializing in studies of the family, civil society, and religion in public life — I bring warm greetings of friendship to you, offered in the sincere hope that, working with you, we can do much in the months and years ahead to increase the communication and deepen the understanding between our two peoples.

We are two very different societies, of course, each with its own distinctive traditions and gifts, but we also have much in common. I am a Christian. One of my favorite verses from our Holy Bible says: "Do we not all have one Father? Has not one God created us?" And I have read in your Holy Koran this beautiful verse (49:13): "O mankind! We have created you from a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of you with Allah is the one who is more pious. Verily, Allah is all knowing, all aware." These and similar verses from our holy scriptures remind us not only of the great historical similarities between Christianity and Islam, with their common roots in the faith of Abraham and Isaac, and not only of the high degree of religiosity in both of our societies, but also that both of our great faith traditions, Islam and Christianity, tend to be universalistic in their outlook.

When we are truest to our faith When we are truest to our faith — when we are pious — both Muslims and Christians seek to understand and relate sympathetically to humanity as a whole. We both are willing to recognize and even emphasize the many ways in which the particular values of our religions are linked to, and contribute to, the universal values of humankind. Because we know that we all have one Father, we can, when we are pious, try to see the spark of the divine — see the essential, God-given dignity — in every human person. Because we know that Allah made us different so that we may know and understand one another, we can, when we are pious, try our best to exclude no human being, and no society anywhere, from the circle of our kinship and from the requirement of equal moral regard.

This is our shared calling. This is our shared vision. Too often, of course, we fail in that calling. Too often we are blind and arrogant and narrow. Too often we are not pious. Certainly that is true of Christians. Critics of religion, in both the West and the East, often make this charge, and

the first thing we must confess, I think, with great sadness, is that too often the charge is accurate.

But there is also a basis of hope and confidence for people of the book who would also be citizens of the world. For we also know, as Muslims and Christians, that recognizing our common humanity is both necessary and possible, and we know further that this recognition of the universality of core human values is a part of our religious understanding and a part of our religious duty. That is important. That is a strong, vital foundation on which we can stand, and work together, seeking to contribute as we can, and as we must, to building a world community based on justice, tolerance, and human dignity.

I want to tell you a story today. It is a story of conflict and, I hope, ultimately of conciliation. It is a story involving the United States, which I love deeply, and the Arab and Muslim world, which I am now coming to know and greatly respect. It may well be the most important and consequential story in the world today. Certainly the stakes are very high. Moreover, whether this story in our generation will ultimately be a happy or a sad one — whether its outcome will make the world a better place or a worse place — is not yet known. It seems likely that much will depend on what is happening on both sides right now, and on what will happen in the very near future.

This story has many characters, of course, and a complex history and narrative. But for me and many of my colleagues at the Institute for American Values, the story began in earnest, or at least took on a sudden new urgency, on September 11, 2001. As you know, about 3,000 Americans were killed on that day in New York, where I live, and in southwestern Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C. These persons were killed unlawfully, wantonly, and with premeditated malice. They were killed in order to terrorize and intimidate us. They were killed in the name of religion. Specifically, they were murdered, we learned, in the name of a totalitarian quest for a society and state based on a profoundly false and manipulated reading of Islam. They were murdered by people who, by their own admission, want nothing more than to do it again, and who clearly seem to have the capacity to do it again — a capacity which stems in part from the support, both direct and indirect, of small but significant minorities of people in a number of Muslim societies.

The attacks of September 11 were a shocking and traumatic event for Americans, and these attacks changed our society — changed the consciousness of our leaders and of our society as a whole — in deep and I believe lasting ways. By now, of course, the initial shock has worn off. But the new consciousness, the new urgency about the world around us and our role in it, remains strong and undiminished.

Soon after the attacks, I began exchanging ideas and reactions with some leading American scholars and public intellectuals who are affiliated with the Institute for American Values, the nonpartisan "think tank" which I direct and helped to found in 1987, and which has focused most of its work on public policies and cultural values regarding marriage, the family, child well-being, and civil society. Soon after September 11, we knew that we must broaden and deepen our focus in order first to understand, and then also perhaps to influence, the new situation before us.

On February 12, 2002 six months after 9/11 and on the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, perhaps our most revered president — 60 of us released to the world a public letter. We called the document, *What We're Fighting For: A Letter from America*. The co-authors and signatories included Jean Bethke Elshtain of the University of Chicago, Francis Fukuyama of Johns Hopkins University, William Galston of the University of Maryland and a former policy advisor to President Clinton, Mary Ann Glendon of Harvard Law School, Robert George of Princeton University, Samuel Huntington of Harvard, James Turner Johnson of Rutgers, former U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Michael Walzer of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, James Q. Wilson, formerly of Harvard and UCLA, and numerous other prominent voices from across the human sciences and across the political spectrum.

Basically, the letter seeks to understand the meaning of the attacks of September 11, both for the United States and the world, and to defend on moral grounds the use of U.S. military force against the perpetrators and supporters of these attacks. This letter from America to the world asks, and seeks to answer, three main questions.

The first question is: "What are American values?" We asked the question because we believe that we were attacked not only, and perhaps not even primarily, because of the policies of our government, but also because of the qualities of our civil society and our overall way of life. So what is that way of life? What do we Americans value? We list some of the values of which we are not proud: our frequently excessive consumerism, our individualism that can lead to self-centeredness and the weakening of the family, and our frequently vulgar entertainment industry.

But we also list other values that we view as much more positive. The idea that all persons are created equal. The idea that moral truths exist and are accessible to all people. The idea that our understanding of the truth is always imperfect, so that most disagreements about values call for civility, openness to other views, and reasonable argument in pursuit of truth. And finally, the importance of freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. We say in the letter — and we now realize that we should have made this point much more clearly — that the best and most important of these values do not belong only to America, but are also the shared inheritance of all people of good will everywhere. We believe that these values are worth fighting for.

The second question is: "What about God?" In trying to understand the meaning of 9/11, is religion a part of the solution or a part of the problem? We answer this question — and most of the signatories to the letter are persons of religious faith and commitment — by arguing for the importance of religious freedom as a fundamental right of all people in every nation.

The final question concerns the morality of the use of force. In response to the attacks of September 11, is the use of violence morally justified? To answer this question, we draw upon what we call just war theory — a broad and well-developed body of religious and ethical teachings about the use of force that dates back many centuries, and that has important roots in Islam, Christianity, and other diverse religions, and well as (more recently) in secular moral traditions. The great value of just war theory — its great contribution to the possibility of justice in the world — is its insistence that we think about war in universal categories and apply universal moral rules to the conduct of war. For if we think about war in this way — if we seek to apply universal principles of justice to the use of force — we quickly see that most wars

throughout history were not morally justified. Indeed, throughout its history, the primary function of just war theory has been to limit the use of force, not to justify or authorize it.

At the same time, there are times when the use of force is necessary, primarily in order to protect the innocent from certain harm. We argue in our letter that the attacks of September 11 constitute one of those times when the use of force as a response to calamitous acts of violence and injustice is not only morally permitted, but morally required. Our letter states: "Organized killers with global reach now threaten all of us. In the name of universal human morality, and fully conscious of the restrictions and requirements of a just war, we support our government's, and our society's, decision to use force of arms against them."

We concluded our letter with these words: "We wish especially to reach out to our brothers and sisters in Muslim societies. We say to you forthrightly: We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. We have so much in common. There is so much that we must do together. Your human dignity, no less than ours — your rights and opportunities for a good life, no less than ours — are what we believe we're fighting for. We know that, for some of you, mistrust of us is high, and we know that we Americans are partly responsible for that mistrust. But we must not be enemies. In hope, we wish to join with you and all people of good will to build a just and lasting peace."

Coming as it did at the time of the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan to replace the Taliban regime, which had openly supported and collaborated with Al Qaeda, the release of our letter drew an immediate and intense reaction, particularly in Europe and in the Arab and Muslim world. Most of the reaction was strongly negative. For example, 153 scholars and public intellectuals in Saudi Arabia issued a detailed and highly critical reply to our letter. (Interestingly, our reply to them, which was published in *al-Hayat*, led to that issue of *al-Hayat* being banned from Saudi Arabia by the Saudi government.) In fact, we spent much of the rest of 2002, in particular, in intensive public debates and written exchanges with groups and individuals from around the world who had responded to our public letter. It was a remarkable experience. I, for one, had never experienced anything quite like it. The major documents from this debate, including the full spectrum of responses, including the public reply purportedly from Al Qaeda, and also including some current reflections, will be published later this year as a book, entitled *The Islam/West Debate*.

But here the story takes a turn. In 2003, I met with Hassan Mneimneh, a Lebanese-American author and leader, and Professor Ridwan El-Sayyed, a distinguished scholar in Islamic studies from the Lebanese University in Beirut. Professor Ridwan is here with me on the podium today and is kindly translating my comments into Arabic for you. He had organized a special issue of a scholarly journal containing analyses of and replies to *What We're Fighting For*. In that meeting in 2003, an idea was born. Instead of more written exchanges, how about face-to-face meetings? Instead of debate, how about dialogue? How about bringing together leading Arab and Muslim public intellectuals, along with their U.S. counterparts, for careful, sustained discussions of these critical issues? For in a time of war and discussions of war, and in a world facing the grim prospect of religious and even civilizational polarization, which tasks facing intellectuals from East and West are more important than finding a time and place to reason together, in the hope of

finding common ground on the meaning of civil society and the basic conditions for human flourishing?

The first of these face-to-face meetings between the two sides took place in Malta in May of 2004, convened and co-chaired by Professor Ridwan, Mr. Hassan, and myself. For three days we discussed just war theory, U.S. and Arab and Muslim civil society, the U.S. war on terrorism, and many other subjects. There were many areas of disagreement and both sides at times experienced considerable frustration. But by the end of our meeting, we all felt, I think, that we had done something worthwhile. Perhaps even important. Perhaps even historic. For we had begun a serious dialogue about the most urgent set of problems facing the world today, on a level playing field and on the basis of full equality, conducted in a spirit of good will and, ultimately, mutual respect. All in all, a pretty good beginning.

Our next meeting of what we are now calling the Malta Forum will take place in October of this year [2005]. Our topic will be religion and the state. After the meeting, we hope to publish a joint statement, signed by the scholars on both sides, detailing our areas of disagreement and agreement and including recommendations for the future for policy makers and other leaders in both the U.S. and the Arab and Muslim world. Our long term goal is to build up, through regular meetings of our Forum, a serious record of dialogue and body of work pointing in the direction, not of a clash of civilizations, but of a global civil society. Over time, and with hard work, we hope and believe that we can truly bridge the civilizational divide, reaching a shared understanding of civil society and the human person. Certainly I can think of few other goals more important than this one, or more worthy of our best efforts.

I hope and pray that our meeting today can in some way contribute to realizing this goal, and for that opportunity I am deeply grateful to you.

Let me conclude my comments by seeking to generalize a bit from the story that I have just told you. Drawing on our experience with the "Letter from America" [i.e., *What We're Fighting For: A Letter from America*] and with our Malta Forum, let me respectfully offer several suggestions to U.S. civic and political leaders, and several to Arab and Muslim civic and political leaders, who seek to participate in serious dialogue and help to make real progress toward the global civil society.

Here are two suggestions for U.S. leaders to consider.

First, despite the example that I am setting here today, lecture less and listen more. We American often tend to think that we know other people's situation better than they do; that our values are, or should be, their values; and that other people could solve their problems in short order if only they would follow American advice. Let me speak with understatement: Often this is not true.

Relatedly, we Americans often seem to think that our views and positions, both governmental and non-governmental, can be effectively communicated to Arab and Muslim publics primarily in the form of top-down, sanitized propaganda dispensed through non-interactive means. Again, with understatement: Often this is not true. U.S. ideas, positions, and values can be much more effectively communicated to Arab and Muslim publics as part of a naturally pluralistic reality,

primarily in the form of peer-to-peer, face-to-face discussions involving U.S. opinion leaders and willing and capable Arab and Muslim interlocutors. If U.S. leaders can move in this direction, they may do much to build trust and to correct the distorted images, widespread today among Arab and Muslim public intellectuals, of a U.S. superpower bent on the exploitation and subjugation of the Arab and Muslim world.

Second, be more consistent when it comes to advocating democracy and human rights. The mistrust of American intentions, which is strong in much of the Arab and Muslim world today, is partly due to the fact that, for decades, America has compromised its commitment to democracy and human rights by frequently supporting unaccountable rulers who mistreat their people. In his recent Inaugural Address, President Bush alluded to this legacy, particularly in the Middle East, and vowed to correct it. From now on, the President said, democracy and human rights are centerpieces of U.S. foreign policy — not just sometimes, but always; and not just in some places, but everywhere. May it be so.

Now here are two suggestions for Arab and Muslim leaders to consider.

First, do not underestimate America's influence in your societies, but do not overestimate it either. There is a tendency among some Arab and Muslim commentators to blame America for nearly all of their problems, even including some obviously home-grown problems, and similarly to imagine that whatever needs to be changed can be accomplished by a change in U.S. policy. Often this is not true. American actions and intentions do matter, of course, but obviously not nearly as much as the actions and intentions of Arabs and Muslims themselves.

Relatedly, do not assume that American leaders are always operating in good faith, but please do not assume bad faith either. Instead, trust, but verify. For example, President Bush just committed the U.S. to pushing hard and consistently for progress in human rights and democracy in the Middle East and the world. Surely, even for those who may usually be skeptical, this is good news, or at least potentially good news. Perhaps this is a basis from which people of good will on both sides can work to reduce mistrust and seek out ways to work together for positive social change.

Second, seek out ways to build on and contribute to the democracy and civil society movements that are already growing in the Arab and Muslim world. These movements are potentially extremely important, both for you and for the world. They are reasons for great hope. They are the chimes of freedom. Today you may be — we all may be — in a moment of great opportunity. Please seize it. Others can wish you well, and perhaps help a bit, or at least get out of your way, but of course in the final analysis only you can do the main work of building and expanding democratic freedoms and human rights in your societies. If you seize this moment, great progress is possible, and others from around the world will learn from you and follow you.

Our vision is a bold one. What do we seek? Working together, we seek to replace the clash of civilizations with a global civil society guided by universal human values and based on the principles of justice and tolerance. I believe that this is the great calling of our generation, a true task for those who would be pious, and I look forward to working with you in the months and years ahead to make this great change in our world.