

# Is there a clash of civilizations?

*The failure of the United Nations response*



## ABOUT THE CENTER FOR INQUIRY

The purpose of the Center for Inquiry is to promote and defend reason, science, and freedom of inquiry in all areas of human endeavor. The Center for Inquiry is a transnational nonpartisan, nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that encourages evidence-based inquiry into science, pseudoscience, medicine and health, religion, ethics, secularism, and society. The Center for Inquiry is not affiliated with, nor does it promote, any political party or political ideology.

The Center holds special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, where it focuses on issues of freedom of expression and scientific inquiry in the international community. Online at [www.centerforinquiry.net](http://www.centerforinquiry.net).

### **Paul Kurtz, PhD**

Chairman

### **Ronald Lindsay, JD, PhD**

Chief Executive Officer and Legal Director

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Austin Dacey** is a philosopher and the Center for Inquiry's representative to the United Nations. He is also on the editorial staff of *Skeptical Inquirer* and *Free Inquiry* magazines. He is the author of *The Secular Conscience: Why Belief Belongs in Public Life* (2008), and his writings have appeared in numerous publications including the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Science*. In 2002 Austin earned a doctorate in philosophy from Bowling Green State University.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was written with research assistance from Ariel Joseph, Esq., Michael Chevinsky, and Colin Koproske.

The reviewing committee for this paper included Malene Busk, PhD, Ifran Khawaja, PhD, Ronald A. Lindsay, JD, PhD, Toni Van Pelt, and Ruth Mitchell, PhD.

Copyright © 2008 Center for Inquiry, Inc. Permission is granted for this material to be shared for noncommercial, educational purposes, provided that this notice appears on the reproduced materials, the full authoritative version is retained, and copies are not altered. To disseminate otherwise or to republish requires written permission from the Center for Inquiry, Inc.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	5
1. History of “The Clash of Civilizations”	5
1.1 Lewis and Huntington	5
1.2 The United Nations response to the clash of civilizations	6
2. Critiques of the Clash of Civilizations	7
2.1 Has the clash of civilizations been overstated?	7
2.2 “Civilization” as methodology and ethos	8
3. United Nations Responses to the Clash of Civilizations	9
3.1 Dialogue among Civilizations	9
3.2 Alliance of Civilizations	9
3.3 General criticisms of the Alliance of Civilizations	10
3.4 Neglecting and denigrating secular perspectives	11
3.5 Perpetuating the problematic division of the world by religion	13
4. What is Clashing?	16
4.1 Against ‘the West’ and ‘the rest’	16
4.2 Against Christianity and Islam	16
4.3 Liberal values and their alternatives	17
5. An Alternative: A Dialogue of Free Persons in an Open Society	17
6. Recommendations	18
7. Conclusion	18

# IS THERE A CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS? *THE FAILURE OF THE UNITED NATIONS RESPONSE*

## Executive Summary

In 2007 the United Nations created an ambitious new institution called the Alliance of Civilizations (AOC), dedicated to defusing crises that arise at the intersection of religion and politics and transforming education and mass media representations of Islam in hopes of changing public opinion. The AOC is the successor to the Dialogue among Civilizations, a series of conferences that took place under UN auspices between 2001 and 2005.

Both enterprises were in part presented as alternatives and correctives to the “clash of civilizations” thesis, associated with the writings of Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, which was said to forecast and maybe even condone intractable tensions and cultural confrontations between “the West” and “the Islamic world.”

This report critically surveys the debate over the notion of a clash of civilizations and the UN responses. We find the UN responses to be fundamentally flawed, and we propose an alternative that is rooted in secular, liberal values.

### LACK OF SECULAR PERSPECTIVES AT THE UNITED NATIONS

The Alliance of Civilizations has inadequately included secular perspectives on religion and politics. Here a “secular” perspective is simply (1) non-religious; (2) expressly committed to secular values—the separation of religion from state, robust freedom of religion, conscience, and expression. AOC meetings are predominated by “interfaith” discussions among representatives of organized religion. Secular values are not adequately represented or advanced as integral to resolving contemporary cross-cultural conflicts.

### THE PROBLEMATIC DIVISION OF THE WORLD BY RELIGION BY THE AOC

Instead of questioning, dismantling, and replacing Huntington's framework that makes civilizations—often defined along religious lines—the principle actors in world affairs, the AOC accepts and implicitly reinforces this framework. In so doing, they perpetuate the politically and morally problematic division of the social world by religion to the neglect of other identities and values.

### WHAT IS CLASHING? LIBERAL VALUES AND THEIR ALTERNATIVES

In the place of a clash or a dialogue of civilizations, we recognize the reality of, and the necessity of, a contest of ideas and ideals. At stake are certain moral-political values and practices of liberalism, broadly understood: individualism, rationality, rule of law, the distinction between the sacred and temporal, freedom of thought and expression, ethical universalism, democratic governance, and (perhaps) economic markets. This clash of values is a clash that takes place *within* societies and cultures, not only between them.

### WHO SHOULD DIALOGUE? PERSONS, NOT CIVILIZATIONS

The negotiation of different values and practices cannot be carried out by “civilizations,” but is best advanced by the unfettered conversation of individual persons under conditions of an open society.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Discontinue the Alliance of Civilizations.** The United Nations General Assembly should move to discontinue the Alliance of Civilizations project at the close of its 2009 programming. The civilizational and religious assumptions foundational to the Alliance are contrary to the United Nations' ultimate aims of intercultural understanding and amity within the framework of universal human rights.
- **Include secular perspectives.** Until the discontinuation of the project, the Alliance of Civilizations should make every effort to include expressly secular perspectives in its programming, most importantly, the views of unaffiliated secular Muslims, dissenters, and apostates.
- **Reaffirm commitment to universal human rights.** In discontinuing the Alliance of Civilizations, the United Nations should restate its commitment to the open society, a society that observes universal human rights norms, most notably the protections of freedom of conscience, belief, and expression found in Articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The United Nations would demonstrate moral leadership by moving to transcend the civilization in favor of the free person.

Rather than constructing a new bureaucracy to serve as a platform for religious authorities, the United Nations should redouble its other efforts—above all, in the area of human rights—to advocate for free, secular, and open societies in which the contest and confluence of ideas and cultures may play out in the dialogue of individual persons.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2007 the United Nations created an ambitious new institution called the Alliance of Civilizations (AOC), dedicated to defusing crises that arise at the intersection of religion and politics and transforming education and mass media representations of Islam in hopes of changing public opinion. The AOC is the successor to the Dialogue among Civilizations, a series of conferences that took place under UN auspices between 2001 and 2005.

Both enterprises were in part presented as alternatives and correctives to the “clash of civilizations” thesis, associated with the writings of Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, which was said to forecast and maybe even condone intractable tensions and cultural confrontations between “the West” and “the Islamic world.”

This report critically surveys the debate over the notion of a clash of civilizations and the UN responses. We find the UN responses to be fundamentally flawed, and we propose an alternative that is rooted in secular, liberal values.

### 1. HISTORY OF “THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS”

#### 1.1 Lewis and Huntington

In September of 1990 Bernard Lewis wrote in *The Atlantic Monthly*

It should by now be clear that we are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations—the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both.

Who was it that was clashing with “our” civilization, as Lewis put it to his readers? The answer was clear: “the Muslim world.”

The struggle between these rival systems has continued “for some fourteen centuries.” For the past three centuries, “since the failure of the second Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683 and the rise of the European colonial empires in Asia and Africa, Islam has been on the defensive, and the Christian and post-Christian civilization of Europe and her daughters has brought the whole world, including Islam, within its orbit.” In the contemporary period, this has led to feelings among many Muslims, of “hostility and rejection.” This is partly due to a sense of “humiliation—a growing awareness, among the heirs of an old, proud, and long dominant civilization, of having been overtaken, overborne, and overwhelmed by those whom they regarded as their inferiors.”

In the summer of 1993, Samuel Huntington published an article in the journal *Foreign Affairs* entitled “The Clash of Civilizations?” According to the editor, the article generated more controversy than any other they had published since the 1940s. The article grew into a book, released in 1996, entitled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. In it Huntington concurred with Henry Kissinger’s observation that the international system of the twenty-first century “will contain at least six major powers—the United States, Europe, China, Japan, Russia, and probably India—as well as a multiplicity of medium-sized and smaller countries.” Kissinger’s six major powers, Huntington claimed, “belong to five very different civilizations, and in addition there are important Islamic

states whose strategic locations, large populations, and/or oil resources make them influential in world affairs. In this new world, local politics is the politics of ethnicity, global politics is the politics of civilizations. The rivalry of the superpowers is replaced by the clash of civilizations" (28).

Chief among those in collision are the civilizations Huntington designated "Western" and "Islamic." Some Westerners have argued, he noted, "that the West does not have problems with Islam but only with violent Islamist extremists. Fourteen hundred years of history demonstrate otherwise" (209).

The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power. The problem for Islam is not the CIA or the U.S. Department of Defense. It is the West, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the universality of their culture and believe that their superior, if declining, power imposes on them the obligation to extend that culture throughout the world (217-8).

Islamic hostility towards the West, he argued, is riding the crest of a global Islamic Resurgence, itself powered by a demographic surge in the youth of Muslim populations. Huntington forecast civilizational clash at least until "the demographic impulse powering it weakens in the second and third decades of the twenty-first century" (120-1).

## **1.2 The United Nations response to the clash of civilizations**

The writings of Lewis and Huntington unleashed a fierce debate around the world, provoking criticisms from noted public intellectuals including Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, Amartya Sen, and Paul Berman. At the same time, the civilizational model contributed to a growing literature by thinkers—as diverse as Oriana Fallici, Salman Rushdie, Ibn Warraq, Roger Scruton, Bat Ye'Or, Philippe Nemo, and Joseph Ratzinger—who took themselves to be defending the West in the face of Islamist and multiculturalist challenges.

In 1998, the Islamic Republic of Iran, then under the leadership of President Hojat al-Islam wa al-Moslemeen Sayyed Mohammad Khatami, advanced at the United Nations the concept of the "dialogue among civilizations," apparently in an attempt to provide an alternative to the Lewis-Huntington thesis.

A close reading of human history would indicate that, notwithstanding formidable obstacles to constructive interaction among nations imposed by episodes and manifestations of intolerance and war, civilizations have always managed to benefit and thrive through communication and mutual enrichment, while preserving their individual identities. . . . Given the fundamental role of culture in shaping political and economic structures, the promotion of dialogue among different cultures, on the basis of tolerance and respect for diversity, would result in the reduction of tensions and contribute to international peace and security. While dialogue by itself would not guarantee the eradication of evils of war and bigotry, it does provide a reasonable and sound paradigm to approach the global problems likely to confront us in the 21st century (United Nations 1998).

Iran proposed a resolution at the UN General Assembly to declare a "United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations."<sup>1</sup> That year was to be 2001.

Beginning in 2001, a series of events centered on dialogue among civilizations commenced under UN auspices. By 2005, the world had witnessed dramatic Islamist terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, London, Madrid, Bali, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Istanbul, Mumbai, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Spanish President Jose Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan proposed the expansion of the initiative into an “alliance of civilizations.” A “High-Level Group” of individuals from academia, religion, government, and media was assembled to make recommendations. The following year the High-Level Group presented its final report to then-UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who proposed the adoption of its recommendations by the General Assembly. The *Report of the High-Level Group* explicitly rejected the notion of inevitable conflict between civilizations, stating

[t]he anxiety and confusion caused by the “clash of civilizations” theory regrettably has distorted the terms of the discourse on the real nature of the predicament the world is facing. The history of relations between cultures is not only one of wars and confrontation. It is also based on centuries of constructive exchanges, cross-fertilization, and peaceful co-existence. . . . by promoting the misguided view that cultures are set on an unavoidable collision course, they help turn negotiable disputes into seemingly intractable identity-based conflicts that take hold of the popular imagination. It is essential, therefore, to counter the stereotypes and misconceptions that deepen patterns of hostility and mistrust among societies (UN 2007b).

The *Report* has led to the creation of an ambitious new institution at the UN called the Alliance of Civilizations, dedicated to defusing crises that arise at the intersection of religion and politics and transforming education and mass media representations of Islam in hopes of “improving popular attitudes between different cultures.”

## 2. CRITIQUES OF THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

### 2.1 Has the clash of civilizations been overstated?

If the United Nations projects on dialogue and alliance of civilizations were motivated in part by the clash of civilizations thesis, it is worth asking what, if anything is wrong with the thesis. It has been criticized on various grounds. According to one line of critique, the Lewis-Huntington thesis overstates the differences or the degree of conflict between the West and the Muslim world. Something like this objection is found in Khatami’s remark that “civilizations have always managed to benefit and thrive through communication and mutual enrichment.”

In his best-selling book *Terror and Liberalism* (2004), Paul Berman wonders “in what degree America’s policies and actions over the last few decades bear out the idea of clashing civilizations” (16). Berman observes that many of the foreign interventions of the United States—from the aid to the *mujahadeen* in Afghanistan in the 1980s to the military actions in Bosnia and Somalia—were undertaken in defense of Muslim populations.

Similarly, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2003) argue that Huntington fails to recognize the degree to which Muslim public opinion favors democracy, one of Huntington’s “distinguishing characteristics” of Western society (69-71). They marshal evidence from the World Values Survey, conducted in 70 countries in 1995–96 and 2000–2002, to show that the West is not set apart from the Muslim world by its support for democratic government. With the exception of Pakistan, the publics of most of the Muslim countries surveyed approve of democracy: In Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Indonesia,

Egypt, Morocco, and Turkey, 92 to 99 percent of the population had a positive attitude toward democratic government (the proportion in the U.S. is 89 percent).

In the opening of *The Clash of Civilizations*, Huntington admits that his picture “omits many things, distorts some things, and obscures others.” But, he insists, if “we are to think seriously about the world, and act effectively in it, some sort of simplified map of reality, some theory, concept, model, paradigm, is necessary” (29). In the construction of large-scale theories of international politics, as in cartography, there is an unavoidable tension between the demands of realism or accuracy and the demands of parsimony and hence utility. In this regard, he compares his own civilizational model to the Cold War model of world politics: “For forty years students and practitioners of international relations thought and acted in terms of the highly simplified but very useful Cold War paradigm of world affairs. This paradigm could not account for everything that went on in world politics. . . . Yet as a simple model of global politics, it accounted for more important phenomena than any of its rivals” (30). Huntington compares the civilizational model to what he regards as its major theoretical rivals, such as the state-based model that views nations states as the only important actors in world affairs.

With respect to Berman's objection, it should be observed that the central construct of *The Clash of Civilizations* is in fact not the clash but the civilization. Huntington's claim is that civilization or culture, rather than race, social class, economic system, political ideology, or nation state, is the unit of classification with the most explanatory and predictive power in contemporary political theory. While much of his discussion is devoted to conflict between the West and Islam, nothing in his view commits Huntington to the claim that conflict is the inevitable relationship between civilizations. He states that we are “moving into an era in which multiple and diverse civilizations will interact, compete, coexist, and accommodate each other” (95).

The central construct  
of *The Clash of  
Civilizations* is in fact  
not the clash but the  
civilization.

## 2.2 “Civilization” as methodology and ethos

Objections alleging that civilizational clashes have been exaggerated may be motivated by a wish that clashes be avoided. It is important to distinguish between a clash thesis as a descriptive theory of world affairs, and as a prescriptive ideal for world affairs, something that expresses political or ethical aspirations. The first can be called Civilizations as Methodology (CM), and the second, Civilizations as Ethos (CE). CM asserts that the civilization is the most useful level of description for understanding post-Cold War world politics, while CE would hold that individual citizens should value the relative supremacy of their civilization in the competition with others, and perhaps regard their civilizational membership as their preeminent source of identity and solidarity.

Surely, one could hold that the realities of the post-Cold War world are such that the civilizational model is the best explanatory tool for international political theory, while maintaining that this is a regrettable state of affairs and even striving to alter these realities. This would be to embrace Civilizations as Methodology while rejecting Civilizations as Ethos. Analogously, one would not necessarily have morally endorsed Cold War politics by recognizing the usefulness of the concepts of the Cold War

paradigm (First World, Second World, Third World, and so on) to understanding the world as it was at the time.

Bernard Lewis concluded his 1990 article by saying “we must take great care on all sides to avoid the danger of a new era of religious wars, arising from the exacerbation of differences and the revival of ancient prejudices. To this end we must strive to achieve a better appreciation of other religious and political cultures, through the study of their history, their literature, and their achievements.” For his part, Huntington (1996) insists that the main threat to Western civilization is not Islam but rather internal disintegration he attributes to the ideology of multiculturalism (305-307). Despite the pugilistic sound of some of his language, he also opposes all “Western intervention” in other civilizations (312).

The rejection of Civilizations as Ethos is not only compatible with the acceptance of Civilizations as Methodology; in some forms these stances will be mutually supporting. Much of the rhetoric of the Alliance of Civilizations project, for example, takes for granted that there are conflicts between two civilizations called “the West” and “Muslim majority societies” that need to be ameliorated; indeed it seems that for some the moral urgency of repudiating CE comes from the recognition that such cultural conflicts are real and important. And this constitutes a reason to accept, however regrettably, the utility of CM.

### **3. UNITED NATIONS RESPONSES TO THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS**

#### **3.1 Dialogue among Civilizations**

The Dialogue among Civilizations was the subject of a round-table at the UN Headquarters in September, 2000. The heads of state from twelve UN member nations attended: the Islamic State of Afghanistan, Algeria, Georgia, Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Latvia, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Qatar and the Sudan, along with the US Secretary of State and Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan, Costa Rica, Egypt, India, and Iraq.

The purpose of the initiative would be to encourage governments and organizations to facilitate dialogue, understood as a process “between and within civilizations, founded on inclusion, and a collective desire to learn, uncover and examine assumptions, unfold shared meaning and core values and integrate multiple perspectives...”<sup>2</sup> Further, the Dialogue of Civilizations was intended to strengthen the commitment to fundamental human rights, along with a respect for fundamental principles of justice and international law. To this end, the UN Secretary-General would select a number of “eminent persons”<sup>3</sup> to lead the discussion. The dialogue took place at a series of conferences held between 2001 and 2005 in Lithuania, Kyoto, New Delhi, India, Macedonia, Russia, Nigeria, Yemen, and Morocco.

#### **3.2 The Alliance of Civilizations**

In 2005, the dialogue project grew into the Alliance of Civilizations (AOC) with the creation of a Secretariat, headed by Acting Director, Shamil Idriss, and the selection of the High-Level Group (HLG). The second meeting of the group in February 2006 was preoccupied by the controversy, then raging around the world, over the publication in Denmark of cartoons of Muhammad, Islam’s founder. In November of that year, the HLG submitted its final report, which found that “[p]olitics, not religion, is at the heart of

growing Muslim-Western divide" (UN 2007b). Four issues were addressed as specific areas of concern to focus on: youth, education, media and migration. The recommendations of HLG included:

- Creation of a High Representative to assist the Secretary-General in defusing crises that arise at the intersection of religion and politics and to oversee the implementation of the Report's recommendations.
- Creation of a "White Paper" to analyze the Israeli-Palestinian conflict objectively.
- An official Middle East conference, including all relevant parties, with a goal of "reinvigorating the peace process."
- A call to the ruling parties in Muslim nations to provide for a democratic society, allowing any non-violent, religious or secular, political parties to participate.
- The development of programming, television and film, illustrating diversity.
- The creation of a "Risk Fund" to offset the market forces that encourage mostly sensationalistic and stereotypical cultural representations. This Risk Fund would act as an insurance against damages caused to theaters, cultural centers and the like if they were to show entertainment/media (e.g., plays, movies) that "humanizes" the West or Muslims.
- The establishment of a "Global Youth Solidarity Fund", to encourage young people to contribute to the implementation of all the recommendations set forth in the HLG Report.
- The promotion of cross-cultural and human rights education to make sure students in all nations understand other cultures and religions.
- A call to "religious leaders, education policymakers, and interfaith civic organizations to work together to develop consensus guidelines for teaching about religions."

In April 2007, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon selected the former President of Portugal, Mr. Jorge Sampaio, to be the High Representative of the AOC who would lead the implementation of these recommendations, as laid out in an "Implementation Plan." The Plan, which describes activities through 2009, calls for an Annual Forum and sponsorship of other meetings related to AOC's four main areas of youth, education, media and migration. It establishes a budget and infrastructure for a High Representative, Group of Friends (participating or supportive UN member states), and Secretariat. Specific projects include: a clearinghouse and "repository" of best practices, materials and resources relating to cross-cultural projects and dialogue related to the four areas of concern; a "Rapid Response Media Mechanism to Address Cross-Cultural Tensions," an international network of prominent personalities who will be mobilized to write op-ed pieces when an event threatens to polarize communities along religious or cultural lines; and "Collaborative Pilot Projects" such as the Middle East Regional Youth Employment Centre, expanding student exchange programs, UNESCO's History of Humanity: Translation and Dissemination, and others.

### **3.3 General criticisms of the Alliance of Civilizations**

The Alliance of Civilizations has been criticized for political bias. Along with its recommendations of a "Middle East peace conference" and a white paper, the *Report* singles out "the Palestinian issue," saying "without a just, dignified, and democratic solution based on the will of all peoples involved in this conflict, all efforts—including the recommendations contained in this report—to bridge this gap and counter the hostilities among societies are likely to meet with only limited success." There is no comparable discussion of Islamist movements and organizations worldwide; the question of tensions between Islamic law and government and universal human rights norms; or the actions

of many mosques, religious charities, and Islamic states that contribute to extremism, intolerance, anti-Semitism. Thus, the *Report* gives the impression that the apparent cultural-civilizational conflicts are entirely or primarily a function of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The AOC might also be subject to a general criticism often leveled against initiatives of the United Nations; namely, that they generate costly bureaucracy with poorly defined goals and no measurable outcomes for determining success, and typically result in little more than occasions for discourse among elites in and around international conferences.

### 3.4 Neglecting and denigrating secular perspectives

Of particular concern is the unfair and unjustified treatment of secular perspectives by the Alliance of Civilizations. Here a secular perspective is not necessarily atheistic or anti-religious, but rather is one that is (1) non-religious; (2) expressly committed to secular values—the separation of religion from state; robust freedom of religion, conscience, and expression. First, AOC meetings are predominated by “interfaith” discussions. They include numerous representatives of organized religion, and almost never a representative of an organization or movement dedicated to secular values. Second, secular values are not put forward as integral to resolving contemporary cross-cultural conflicts; when secularism is discussed, the purpose is usually to dismiss or denigrate it.

The anti-secular orientation of the UN-led dialogues among civilizations might have been predicted from the outset, on the basis of the first major address by their progenitor, former Iranian president Khatami:

At times, we encounter a difficult situation where we interact with a language which sounds the same as the one we use, however, the universe to which these two languages belong are very different. One of the most arduous passages in the road of dialogue among cultures arises when a party to the dialogue attempts to communicate with another by employing a basically secularist language—I'm here referring to a broad and general concept of secularism which means the rejection of any intuitive spiritual experience and any belief in the unseen—in an essentially sacred and spiritual discourse.

Khatami concluded that “the Cartesian-Faustian narrative of Western civilization should give way and begin to listen to other narratives proposed by other human cultures.” AHe remains a member of the AOC High-Level Group. Other members include Archbishop Desmond Tutu; Rabbi Arthur Schneie; and Professor John Esposito, Founding Director of

the Prince Al-Waleed bin-Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. From its inception, the Center has been controversial because of its major funding by the Saudi royal family. No member of the High-Level Group represents a secularist organization.

The actions of the AOC have led to the elevation of “interfaith dialogue” to the neglect of secular perspectives.

In 2005 the AOC sponsored a seminar entitled “International Security and Cosmopolitan Democracy.” An accompanying paper argued that Western, and in particular European, advocates of secular democracy are guilty of a “selective memory” with regard to their own history

of secularization, democracy, and religious extremism (UN 2005b). The paper claimed that Western societies are not more advanced than the Islamic world with regards to secularism and accused them of a hypocritical stance on religion's role in the public sphere (6). A Spanish non-profit organization called Atman Foundation hosted "Atman Encounter 2005: Dialogue among Cultures and Religions" in Madrid. While the conference paper acknowledged that the Western world has had more success with regard to religion and democracy than the Islamic world has, and that "teaching about religion must not be left in the hands of religious leaders," it asserted that before the Western world can "preach democracy" to others, it is necessary to "look at ourselves and see what has not worked in our liberal democracies." Liberal democracies should not judge the treatment of women under Islam until they exercise "self-criticism" (UN 2005a, 4-8, 13).

With rare exceptions, such as a forum hosted by the World Political Forum, founded by Mikhail Gorbachev, meetings supported by the AOC have tended to focus on interfaith understanding. At "For a World of Peace: Religions and Cultures in Dialogue," a session entitled "Secular Humanism, a Challenge for Believers and Non-Believers," featured Vincenzo Paglia, Bishop of Terni-Narni-Amelia, Italy; Enzo Bianchi, Prior of Bose; and Emma Fattorini, "La Sapienza" University of Rome, among other speakers.<sup>4</sup> Subsequent sessions covered "Longing for God: A Quest for Peace" and Prayer at the Root of Peace.<sup>5</sup> The group Imams and Rabbis for Peace met in Brussels to discuss "Islam and Judaism as instruments of peace—recognition and respect of others" (First World Congress 2005). The meeting also saw the proposal of an "International Interreligious Monitoring Centre," established to denounce anti-religious acts worldwide. It appears that for the United Nations, dialogue among civilizations is dialogue first and foremost among and about religions.<sup>6</sup>

The Center for Inquiry pointed out this lack of secular perspectives publicly to the acting director at a 2006 briefing at UN Headquarters in New York City, and urged the Secretariat to include secular voices in future Alliance of Civilizations events. The Council of Europe has noted the ideological imbalance of the AOC project. In a formal Recommendation of the Parliamentary Assembly in June 2007, it resolved to "work at the level of the United Nations in order to ensure that . . . the work of the Alliance of Civilizations avoids the stereotype of a so-called "Western" culture, widens its scope to other world religions and promotes more open debates between different religious groups and with non-religious groups" (Council of Europe 2007).

Despite repeated attempts, the Center for Inquiry was not invited to send a representative or observer to the first Annual Forum in January 2008, a meeting which was closed to the public. Similarly not represented was the International Humanist and Ethical Union, a distinguished secular humanist organization that has been active at the United Nations for decades.

The poor treatment of expressly secular perspectives in AOC discussions is particularly problematic given the nature of the issues in question, chief among them potentially religiously offensive expression such as the Muhammad cartoons. One might expect that a commitment to the value of freedom of expression would be central to the AOC, which holds that "genuine dialogue among nations requires a common understanding of human rights principles and a universal commitment to their full and consistent application" and must be "founded on respect for human rights . . . as defined in 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Geneva Convention, and other basic documents" (UN 2007b, 19). Instead, the *Report* declares that "media professionals" must

use their power responsibly, particularly during “times of crisis when popular emotions and fears are heightened and in covering the intersection of religion and politics” (40), and it proposes a “collaborative and reciprocal initiative for monitoring media coverage of Islamic-Western relations” (42). Nothing is said about religious and cultural norms and practices that promulgate hatred of Jews, Christians, and nonbelievers; oppose freedom of expression on principle; and regard blasphemy as a serious moral vice, or even a capital crime. Public and private donors are instructed to contribute to a fund that would compensate theaters, museums, publishing houses, and other cultural venues for vandalistic attacks provoked by programming that attempts “humanize and normalize the views of populations in the West and in predominantly Muslim societies about one another.” Muslim opinion leaders and ordinary believers are not asked to refrain from or to renounce intimidation and violent retaliation when confronted with public speech and expression which they find religiously offensive.

UN projects such as the AOC perpetuate the problematic division of the world by religion, for which they criticize the “clash of civilizations.”

Of course, none of the above should be taken to imply that religious representatives have no place in cross-cultural dialogue. Rather, the point is that any such dialogue is unacceptably incomplete and imbalanced without adequate representation of secular perspectives.

### 3.5 Perpetuating the problematic division of the world by religion

#### *Equating civilizations with religions*

Apart from questioning the extent of the clash, one might instead question the prior theoretical construct of the civilization. According to this line of critique, the civilizational approach, in the words of Amartya Sen, “has tended to suffer from ignoring the diversities within each identified civilization and also from overlooking the extensive interrelations between distinct civilizations” (Sen 2006, 45). The result is that civilizations are seen as “more homogeneous and far more insular than tends to emerge from empirical analysis of the past and the present” (46). The use of civilizations as a methodology in international politics (CM), in short, is unsustainable on empirical grounds. Something like this charge is found in the United Nations claim that the “history of relations between cultures” is “based on centuries of constructive exchanges, cross-fertilization.”

Sen illustrates his objection with the case of India, classified by Huntington as a “Hindu civilization.”

India may not be placed within the arbitrary definition of “the Muslim world,” but it is still the case that India (with its 145 million Muslims—more than the whole British population and the entire French population put together) has a great many more Muslims than nearly every country in Huntington’s definition of “the Muslim world.” Also it is impossible to think of the civilization of contemporary India without taking note of the major roles of Muslims in the history of the country. . . . It would be, in fact, quite futile to have an understanding of the nature and range of Indian art, literature, music, films, or food without seeing the range of contributions coming from both Hindus and Muslims in a thoroughly intermingled way (47).

Further, Islamic culture is not the only significant non-Hindu contributor to Indian culture. For over a millennium, the dominant religion of India was Buddhism. Christian communities have been in India since the fourth century.

A defender of CM might concede this counterexample, but nevertheless maintain that the major civilizations on the world stage, while internally heterogeneous and interpenetrating, are discrete and coherent enough to support explanations and predictions of major events in international affairs. It is not our purpose here to determine whether Huntington's work, or the CM approach more generally, are innocent or guilty of sacrificing too much descriptive accuracy for the sake of theoretical parsimony (and, perhaps, polemical purposes). What is significant for present purposes is that the United Nations projects such as the AOC perpetuate the problematic division of the world by religion, for which they purport to criticize the Lewis-Huntington thesis. For Sen,

the crudeness of civilizational classification is not only historically misleading but politically dangerous, particularly where civilizations are seen as coextensive with major religions. In India, for example, it lends credibility to the efforts of Hindu sectarian politicians who have tried to promote a vision of the country as a Hindu civilization. 'Huntington is indeed frequently quoted by many leaders of the politically active 'Hindutva movement'' (48).

Were the vision of the Hindu Right to prevail, it would entail a radical departure from India's tradition of a secular government, going back to the country's creation.

The concern that Sen raises is a concern about Civilizations as Ethos. We might generalize this concern as follows. To the extent that in public discourse the world is divided along religious lines, political actors on all sides will find it more difficult to recognize and to mobilize on behalf of secular values and practices, and reactionary forces will find it easier to exploit religious solidarities to advance their political projects.

*Religion as the preeminent source of identity for persons*

The criticism that all civilizational analyses are prone to ignore the heterogeneity of cultures points to another kind of complexity that can be overlooked: the complexity of the identity of individual persons.

The difficulty with the thesis of the clash of civilizations begins well before we come to the issue of an inevitable clash; it begins with the presumption of the unique relevance of a singular classification. Indeed, the question "do civilizations clash?" is founded on the presumption that humanity can be preeminently classified into distinct and discrete civilizations, and that the relationship *between different human beings* can somehow be seen, without serious loss of understanding, in terms of relations *between different civilizations* (Sen 2006, 11).

On the contrary, persons identify themselves not only as members of this or that civilization. Persons have a multiplicity of identities, and depending on changing circumstances may have more reason to invoke or emphasize one or the other of these identities. "For example, a Bangladeshi Muslim is not only a Muslim but also a Bengali and a Bangladeshi, typically quite proud of the Bengali language, literature, and music, not to mention the other identities he or she may have connected with class, gender, occupation, politics, aesthetic taste, and so on" (15).

Sen goes on to argue that the “limitations of such civilization-based thinking can prove to be just as treacherous for programs of ‘dialogue of civilization’ . . . as they are for theories of a clash of civilizations.”

The noble and elevating search for amity among people seen as amity between civilizations speedily reduces many-sided human beings into one dimension each and muzzles the variety of involvements that have provided rich and diverse grounds for cross-border interactions over many centuries . . . . Well-meaning attempts at pursuing global peace can have very counterproductive consequences when these attempts are founded on a fundamentally illusory understanding of the world of human beings (12).

One danger of this approach is that it has the effect of “generally magnifying the voice of religious authority. The Muslim clerics, for example, are then treated as the ex officio spokesmen for the so-called Islamic world, even though a great many people who happen to be Muslim by religion have profound differences with what is proposed by one mullah or another” (Sen 2006, 13). This pattern can be observed in the nature of the discussion sponsored under UN auspices, which give a special platform to religious representatives. The civilizational scale of analysis obscures from view kinds of persons and intracultural movements that are important for moral-political progress; among them, defenders of secular liberal values, and those who self-identify as secular Muslims, ex-Muslims, or secularists of Muslim origin.

In 2007, the Center for Inquiry co-sponsored an international gathering of such intellectuals and activists, called the Secular Islam Summit. The Summit issued a declaration, which read in part:

We are secular Muslims, and secular persons of Muslim societies. We are believers, doubters, and unbelievers, brought together by a great struggle, not between the West and Islam, but between the free and the unfree.

We affirm the inviolable freedom of the individual conscience. We believe in the equality of all human persons.

We insist upon the separation of religion from state and the observance of universal human rights.

We find traditions of liberty, rationality, and tolerance in the rich histories of pre-Islamic and Islamic societies. These values do not belong to the West or the East; they are the common moral heritage of humankind.<sup>7</sup>

Among the earliest and staunchest critics of the Secular Islam Summit was the Council on American Islamic Relations, or CAIR. Rather than engaging with the substance of the views espoused, like those above, CAIR charged that the Summit was “illegitimate” because they objected to backgrounds and orientations of the speakers and organizers. The implication was that certain other people constitute legitimate spokespersons for Islam, and that only such legitimate spokesperson are worthy of attention in public discourse. CAIR’s response to these dissident views illustrates the peril, pointed out by Sen, of dividing the world along religious lines. It would have the effect of silencing voices and narrowing the pluralism of perspectives. That is not a recipe for dialogue.

If United Nations efforts such as the Alliance of Civilizations are to produce fruitful dialogue and the discovery of shared values transcending the West-Islam boundary, we recommend that they not pursue the same fundamentally flawed strategy.

## 4. WHAT IS CLASHING?

If, following Sen, we reject civilizations as the morally appropriate unit for our identity and agency, then what are we to make of the calls to defend Western or Euroamerican civilization? Are they misguided, pernicious even? To answer this question, we must ask what exactly these cultural commentators—call them Westernists—wish to defend. Upon closer examination, the only plausible object of concern is not a civilization as such, but certain moral-political *values* and *ideals*, which can be embodied (or not) in the practices and institutions of various societies or cultures.

### 4.1 Against “the West” and “the rest”

What is it that some want to preserve when they say they want to preserve “the West”? Surely it is not any nation state or language; presumably that is the point of concern for “the West,” as opposed to concern for Denmark or Danish. Neither could Westernists coherently seek merely to preserve the actual societies of Latin Christian heritage. For presumably if Denmark were transformed by demographic forces or internal cultural change to resemble Muslim North Africa, Westernists would not be content, even though Denmark’s *historical continuity* with Latin Christendom would remain unaltered (it would remain true that the transformed Denmark is the country that evolved from Christendom). Insofar as Westernists seek the supremacy of civilizations understood as collections of nation states or extant societies, then they would be engaging in a kind of nationalistic civilizational chauvinism, a version of the objectionable Civilizations and Ethos. This way lies the racism of which Oriana Fallaci was accused.

### 4.2 Against Christianity and Islam

In a similar way, to the extent that Westernists seek to preserve Christianity as such, they would be guilty of a narrow and problematic religious chauvinism. No reasonable person holds that simply because something can be associated with Christianity, it is worth preserving, even at the cost of having to vanquish its cultural competitors; consider the Catholic practice of mortification of the flesh, or the theological case for chattel slavery. On the other hand, there seem to be things that Westernists want to uphold that have no direct association with Christianity; for example, practices of democratic governance. It is not Christianity as such that the more thoughtful and influential Westernists hope will prevail in the clash of civilizations, but instead some broader features of the societies of Christian heritage. Contemporary anxiety about secularism in Europe expressed by thinkers like Joseph Ratzinger (2007) and Philippe Nemo (2006) does not presuppose that European culture is *equivalent* to Christian culture. Rather, it is about whether European culture can flourish without actively acknowledging its distinctively Christian sources.

In Lewis’ view, the chief enemy of Islamism is not Christianity as such but rather secularism, the separation of the sacred and civil orders: “Ultimately, the struggle of the fundamentalists is against two enemies, secularism and modernism. The war against secularism is conscious and explicit, and there is by now a whole literature denouncing secularism as an evil neo-pagan force in the modern world and attributing it variously to the Jews, the West, and the United States” (Lewis 1990). Secularism is historically linked to Christianity, but has now taken on a life of its own: “The origins of secularism in the west may be found in two circumstances—in early Christian teachings and, still more, experience, which created two institutions, Church and State; and in later Christian conflicts, which drove the two apart.” Similarly, Huntington (1996) includes Catholicism

and Protestantism among what he considers “distinguishing characteristics of Western civilization,” but he also includes (among others) the separation of spiritual and temporal authority, rule of law, social pluralism, representative bodies, and individualism. It is the latter, Huntington says, which both Western and non-Westerners point to again and again “as the central distinguishing mark of the West” (72).

#### 4.3 Liberal values and their alternatives

Given the most charitable interpretation of the concerns about the survival of the West, then, they are concerns about the survival of certain moral-political values and practices; namely the values and practices of liberalism: individualism, rationality, rule of law, the distinction between the sacred and temporal, freedom of thought and expression, ethical universalism, democratic governance, and (perhaps) economic markets (Seidenfaden 2007, 13-20).

Consider the comments of author Ibn Warraq (1995) on the true nature of the clash in question: “The West needs to be serious about democracy, and should eschew policies that compromise principles for short-term gains at home and abroad. The rise of fascism and racism in the West is proof that not everyone in the West is enamored of democracy. Therefore, the final battle will not necessarily be between Islam and West, but between those who value freedom and those who do not” (360). It appears that what Warraq cares about is the moral value of freedom, and not its civilizational affiliation as such. In such discourse, the enjoinder to defend the West stands in for the enjoinder to stand up for broadly liberal values.

### 5. AN ALTERNATIVE: A DIALOGUE OF FREE PERSONS IN AN OPEN SOCIETY

In the place of a clash or a dialogue of civilizations, we recognize the reality of, and the necessity of, a contest of values, ideas, ideals, and practices. Unlike civilizations, values and practices are not intrinsically linked to history—they can be described in a way that abstracts from particular periods, peoples, and places. For example, the liberal practices described in seventeenth century European natural rights discourse, or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are not linked to any one society. In this way, the identification with a liberal order<sup>8</sup> can avoid the identification with a particular

There is a clash.  
It is not a clash of  
*civilizations*, but a  
clash of *values*, and it  
takes place *within*  
societies and  
cultures.

civilization, and thus the error and dangers of Civilizations as Ethos. Further, the clash of values is a clash that takes place *within* societies and cultures, not only between them. For example, contemporary Iranian society contains advocates of the Khomeinist doctrine of rule-by-clerics as well as secular student and labor activists opposing the regime (among many other views). Thus, the idea of a clash of values is consistent with the deep intracultural heterogeneity that Sen and others have highlighted.

The Westernists are of course correct that Euroamerican societies have made exceptional or even singular contributions to certain ideals and practices, such as individualism. However, for the reasons elaborated above, it is neither appropriate nor helpful to describe these practices as *belonging* to these societies. By analogy, the values and practices of various musical forms have specific historical origins

in particular cultures and places. While some practices (e.g., the sonata or hip-hop) have a uniquely Western origin, others (e.g., the use of meter or a tonal center) have parallel origins in other cultures. Even in cases of practices with uniquely European or American histories, there is no reason to think that such practices cannot be discovered, understood, appreciated, and even improved upon by others. Musical practices, and the varieties of beauty they create, just do not *belong* to any person, culture, or civilization.

In a world of competing values and practices, the most fruitful dialogue will not be among civilizations but among individuals persons under the conditions of an open society—free expression and access to the modern engines of public deliberation such as publishing, mass media, education, civil association and organization. No framework for dialogue can coherently be antagonistic or even indifferent towards secular values. Rather, the separation of sacred from temporal power and the freedom of conscience, belief, and expression are the very prerequisites for genuine dialogue.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Center for Inquiry makes the following recommendations:

1. **Discontinue the Alliance of Civilizations.** The United Nations General Assembly should move to discontinue the Alliance of Civilizations project at the close of its 2009 programming. The civilizational and religious assumptions foundational to the Alliance are contrary to the United Nations' ultimate aims of intercultural understanding and amity within the framework of universal human rights.
2. **Include secular perspectives.** Until the discontinuation of the project, the Alliance of Civilizations should make every effort to include expressly secular perspectives in its programming, most importantly, the views of unaffiliated secular Muslims, dissenters, and apostates.
3. **Reaffirm commitment to universal human rights.** In discontinuing the Alliance of Civilizations, the United Nations should restate its commitment to the open society, a society that observes universal human rights norms, most notably the protections of freedom of conscience, belief, and expression found in Articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The United Nations would demonstrate moral leadership by moving to transcend the civilization in favor of the free person.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The United Nations response to the clash of civilizations thesis is fundamentally flawed. Instead of questioning, dismantling, and replacing Huntington's framework that makes civilizations—often defined along religious lines—as the principal actors in world affairs, the Alliance of Civilizations accepts and implicitly reinforces this framework. Unfortunately, this has led to the elevation of “interfaith dialogue” to the neglect of secular perspectives. Secular voices deserve to be heard, and are essential to contemporary debates over religion and politics. There is a clash. It is not a clash of civilizations, but a clash of values, a clash between broadly liberal moral-political ideals and practices, and their alternatives. Rather than constructing a new bureaucracy to serve as a platform for religious authorities, the United Nations should redouble its other efforts—above all, in the area of human rights—to advocate for free, secular, and open

societies in which the contest and confluence of ideas and cultures may play out in the dialogue of individual persons.

Salman Rushdie has described the battle over *The Satanic Verses* as “a battle about who gets to tell the story. I was saying that we all should be able to tell the stories of our lives and retell the great stories, such as those in religion. But there are those who say, We tell these stories, and what is more, this is what they mean. You will understand them in the following way, and if not, we will kill you” (Keller 2004). Final authority on the telling of our stories does not belong to any ayatollah, priest, or rabbi; nor to any government or bureaucracy. If there is any hope of using dialogue to avert violent clashes between the values and practices of liberal democracy and their alternatives, it lies in the unauthorized, unfettered conversation of free persons in a secular, open society.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Berman, Paul. 2004. *Terror and Liberalism*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Council of Europe. 2007. Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1805. *Blasphemy, religious insults and hate speech against persons on grounds of their religion*. <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta07/EREC1805.htm>.

Huntington, Samuel. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

First World Congress of Imams and Rabbis for Peace. 2005. *Summary of Sessions*. Egmont Palace, Brussels. [http://www.imamsrabbis.org/public/deposit/pdf/brussels\\_synthesis.pdf](http://www.imamsrabbis.org/public/deposit/pdf/brussels_synthesis.pdf).

Inglehart, Ronald and Pippa Norris. 2003. “The True Clash of Civilizations.” *Foreign Policy* 135: 62-70.

Keller, Johanna. 2004. “The Fatwa That Begat an Opera.” *New York Times*, October 31.

Lewis, Bernard. 1990. “The Roots of Muslim Rage.” *The Atlantic Monthly* 266, no. 3: 47-60. <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/199009/muslim-rage>

Nemo, Philippe. 2006. *What is the West?* Duquesne University Press.

Ratzinger, Joseph, Jürgen Habermas, and Florian Schuller. 2007. *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*. Translated by Brian McNeil. Ignatius Press.

Said, Edward. 2001. “The Clash of Ignorance.” *The Nation*, October 22. <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20011022/said/2>

Seidenfaden, Toger. 2008. “What is the West?” in Kurt Almquist, *What is the West? Perspectives from the Engelsberg seminar 2007*. Stockholm: Axel and Margaret Axson Johnson Foundation. p. 13-20.

Sen, Amartya. 2006. *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. New York: W.W. Norton.

United Nations. 1998. H.E. Dr. M. Javad Zarif, Deputy Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran before the UN General Assembly, Under item 168 (Dialogue Among Civilizations). November 4.  
<http://www.un.int/iran/statements/generalassembly/session53/7.html>

United Nations. 2005(a). "Atman Encounter 2005."  
[http://www.unaoc.org/repository/Atman\\_Encounter\\_2005.pdf](http://www.unaoc.org/repository/Atman_Encounter_2005.pdf). *Note that a list of conference participants is also contained in the previous link.*

United Nations. 2005(b). Alliance of Civilizations: International Security and Cosmopolitan Democracy, Seminar Conclusions. <http://www.ucm.es/info/icei/pdf/WP%2003-05.pdf>

United Nations. 2007(a). Alliance of Civilizations: Implementation Plan. May.  
<http://www.mae.es/NR/rdonlyres/A9421AB1-25D3-4617-99E6-8F2FE0AD104F/0/AlianzaCivplan2007EN.pdf>

United Nations. 2007(b). Alliance of Civilizations: High Level Group Report. November 13. p. 33-42. [http://www.unaoc.org/repository/HLG\\_Report.pdf](http://www.unaoc.org/repository/HLG_Report.pdf)

Warraq, Ibn. 1995. *Why I Am Not a Muslim*. Prometheus Books.

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Yuichi Ishii, Japanese Ambassador to Yemen in "*Dialogue among Civilizations*", Feb. 10-11, 2004, p. 34, 166, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001404/140496e.pdf>; UN Resolution "Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace" – A/RES/53/243, <http://www.decade-culture-of-peace.org/resolutions/resA-53-243B.html>; United Nations General Assembly resolution 56/6 of 21 November 2001: Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations, <http://www.un.org/documents/ares566e.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.un.org/documents/ares566e.pdf>; see also <http://www.un.org/documents/dialogue.htm> for a list of DaC documents, meetings and related UN resolutions.

<sup>3</sup> For a list of such "eminent persons", see <http://www.un.org/Dialogue/eminentpersons.html>.

<sup>4</sup> The U.S. representative for the conference informed the authors that the transcripts of this session are unavailable.

<sup>5</sup> Note that no transcripts of this session are available. Speakers for this particular session included: Pascal N'Koue, Bishop of Natitingou, Benin; Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, Rector of Al-Azhar University, Egypt; Laurentiu, Orthodox Metropolitan, Patriarchate of Rumania; Joseph Levi, Rabbi of Florence, Italy; Salvatore Martinez, Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Italy; Mesrob II, Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople; Shoten Minegishi, Soto Zen Buddhism, Japan.

<sup>6</sup> Some have objected that the Alliance of Civilizations has erred by not including enough Muslim religious authorities, and giving too much attention to non-religious figures such as the Queen Noor of Jordan. The criticism is that it will be relatively difficult for such personalities to influence the opinion of religiously conservative Muslims, as compared to clerics or respected Islamic scholars. The Center for Inquiry does not object to the participation of religious authorities, and recognizes their value for reaching the broadest possible audience. By a "secular perspective" we do not

---

mean merely a “non-religious” perspective (such as a politician's), but also one that is explicitly committed to separation of religion from state and robust freedom of conscience, expression, and religion.

<sup>7</sup> Online at [www.secularislam.org](http://www.secularislam.org).

<sup>8</sup> “Liberal” is used to signify the tradition of liberalism in contemporary political philosophy, not the stance of any particular party, national variation, or economic system.