

"Clash of Traditions" Offer Glimmers of Hope  
Posted On:December 31, 1969

Samuel D. Huntington warned in his landmark book Clash of Civilizations (1996) that we were headed for stormy times when the largest civilizations would not meet peacefully. His views were met with torrents of argument by most scholars who, upon the end of the Cold War, were convinced that the world had globalized; that the United States and its values had dominated all others, and that there was nothing really left to fight about. War was no longer really conceivable. We had every institution needed to regulate a peaceful, rational world order.

Even I, who had lived in Iran and had seen a Muslim culture up close, thought that Huntington drew civilizational lines between civilizations without considering layers---such as the commonality of the elites across civilizations who were all educated in the West sharing more with each other than with their own civilizations.

Alas, Huntington was right and we were all wrong. The elites, as many foreign brides (myself included) learned, reverted to their timeless geopolitical and cultural natures and our marriages fell apart. Huntington was also right that Islam's borders with every non-Muslim neighbor would be bloody. They did and are doing so today. Even the concept of nation-state imposed on them is melting down and they are reverting to clan and cult.

However, it is not all bad news. There is another sort of cultural border that nobody is watching: "tradition."

Tradition, for the most part, emerged for the comfort of men and the control of women. The majority of traditions in world cultures spell out what women must or may not do, particularly in regard to their bodies and sexuality. Other than food traditions, which I truly love, most have to do with virginity at marriage so that men may be assured of exclusive paternity. Most traditions also involve submission to males, but most such traditions are under challenge today as cultural isolation faces dislocation, television, cinema, and contact.

Two otherwise wretched brushes with tradition were challenged in March. In Afghanistan, an ugly mob of men beat, stomped, ran over, and burned to death a woman student they thought had burned a few pages of a Koran (filmed by bystanders for the world to see). She had not done this. The burned pages were not even from a Koran; they were from a Persian book; but even had it been the Koran, did it warrant such a murder?

In an amazing surprise, the Afghan Ministry of Religious Affairs investigated. The negligent police, religious officials, and 13 suspects have been arrested! And wonder of wonders, women (unheard of) carried the coffin to its burial place, faces sorrowfully shown in an LA Times photo in defiance of Muslim custom. An ugly tradition has been bearded, revealed to the world, and prosecuted by the state!

Another challenge to another ugly cultural holdover, this time a Pakistani holdover in Canada. Mariam was a sixth grader (11 years old) in Toronto when she started getting pressure from her family to get engaged. Like so many Pakistani children, she was sent to Pakistan on summer vacation to meet someone selected by an aunt (probably a cousin), but unlike many others who never made it home, she did return home, refusing to marry.

Her mother nagged, wept, refused to speak to her, prayed aloud, did everything to convince her that she was dishonoring her family, but Mariam continued going to school. At 17, she tried to leave home but a women's shelter wouldn't take her because she was not being physically abused. She did eventually find shelter and is now part of a nationwide campaign to help immigrant girls and women facing this sort of pressure, a problem already familiar in the UK, where schoolgirls vanished each summer on "vacation" to Pakistan.

The fact that this issue has been raised in Washington is good news, and we might soon be having laws similar to those now in the United Kingdom making forced marriage a crime.

Bad traditions are finally starting to crumble. There is hope.

681 words

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