Where Do We Go from Here?

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, as we ask, Why did this happen?, government officials, pundits, and experts bombard us with a litany of certitudes: bin Laden and al-Qaeda are religious fanatics; this is proof positive of a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West; the terrorists hate our American way of life—our power, prosperity, and freedoms; Islam is incompatible with modernity and democracy; violence and terrorism are integral to Muslim belief and practice; we are now facing a global jihad against the West.

Making Sense of Islam and the Muslim World

Several decades ago, a Muslim ambassador to the United Nations wrote a short book, *Islam: The Misunderstood Religion*. At that time, given the invisibility of Muslims on the American landscape and in our educational curriculum, the author’s choice of title seemed appropriate. Today, we know more, but much of our knowledge has been gained through headline events, from the Iranian Revolution to September 11. When the Iranian Revolution occurred in 1978, despite the fact that Islam was the second largest of the world’s religions, encompassing more than fifty countries, during the hostage crisis the *Today Show* coanchor found it necessary to interrupt his reading of the news to give Americans a brief background on Islam. It was very brief: Islam is the second largest world religion; it has a scripture called the Quran and a prophet named Muhammad. This most basic information was deemed necessary for viewers in one of the world’s most advanced and educated nations! At the same time, most Americans would have expected that any educated person in the world would recognize the terms Judaism, Christianity, and Bible and the names Moses and Jesus.

Our knowledge of the Islam of the vast majority of Muslims and its connection to the Judeo-Christian tradition remains minimal or nonexistent. While Christians today have been raised to appreciate family resemblances with Judaism and to speak of a Judeo-Christian tradition, at best Islam has been presented as a foreign, non-Western religion, often grouped with Hinduism and Buddhism. The fact that Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, has its origins in the Middle East, that it represents belief in heaven, hell, and the Day of Judgment, and venerates prophets from the Old and New Testaments including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus is unknown to the vast majority of non-Muslims.

How many Jews and Christians know that they join Muslims as “Children of Abraham,” that Muslims believe that they are the religious descendants of Ismail, the first-born son of Abraham and his servant Hagar? How many know that the Quran acknowledges, “We believe what you believe, your God and our God is one” (29:46)? Yet, while Yahweh is generally known to be the Hebrew name for the God of the Bible, Allah is often still regarded as the proper name of an alien God rather than the Arabic word for God, used by Arab Christians as well as Muslims when they pray.

Christians have come to know and value their Jewish neighbors because of decades of living together and the active efforts of many to establish linkages, in particular an awareness of a shared religious heritage, a Judeo-Christian tradition, and the scourge of anti-Semitism which culminated in the Holocaust. Muslims have gone from the unknown “other” or the product of oriental stereotypes of Arabian Nights—sheiks and harems and flying carpets—to masked, armed hijackers and hostage takers. While many in the United States have come to appreciate the historic persecution and victimhood of Jews and understand the creation of Israel, American textbooks
and media in past years had precious little to say about the Palestin-
ian side of the story: the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the hun-
dreds of thousands of refugees and generations raised in refugee
camps, strangers in their homeland. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict
is a tragedy for two peoples with mutual claims, entitlement, and
histories of suffering, violence, and terrorism.

Despite increased coverage and awareness of Islam, the neces-
sity of responding to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda forced many
policymakers, commentators, the media, and the general public
to realize how little they really knew about a major religion and
strategic part of the world. As one Senate leader confessed, “I know
a lot about many things but nothing about Islam and the Muslim
world—and neither do most of my colleagues!” While many are
sincere in their desire to know more, others epitomize the saying:
“My mind’s made up, don’t confuse me with the facts!” At one
level, it is easy to portray September 11 as the latest phase in a
historic battle between Islam and the West, as militant Islam has
now gone global. However, this dangerous oversimplification mim-
ics the distorted, polarized worldview and message of the bin
Ladens of the world. If we start out by presuming that the other is
completely different, we can find whatever we are looking for.

As we move forward in the twenty-first century, a key reality to
keep in mind is that Islam is the second largest and fastest grow-
ing religion not only out there, but also in Europe and America.
Improving our understanding of the faith of our fellow citizens
and neighbors will require that we look at Muslims with new eyes
and judge Islam by the totality and teachings of the faith, not just
the beliefs and actions of a radical few.

An important first step is to guard against judging Islam by a
double standard. When we approach Judaism or Christianity or
understand our own faith, we operate differently. We interpret the
violent, bloody texts in the Bible in their historical contexts. We
explain the history of violence, slaughter, and imperialism in the
name of Judaism or Christianity in terms of the times and con-
text, or we condemn such acts as aberrations or extremist. The

Christianity that inspired Archbishop Desmond Tutu and many
others in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa has also
been claimed as the religion of Afrikaaners, the faith of American
slave owners and their pastors on the one hand and Martin Luther
King, Jr., on the other. The Judaism of members of the Jewish De-
fense League or of the young assassin of Yitzak Rabin is the tran-
scendent, transforming faith of the prophets of Israel and countless
pious Jews through the ages. Most people readily recognize dis-
tinctions between those who are true examples of faith and those
who hijack the faith, as well as between the mainstream and extre-
mists on the fringe.

Looking to the future, as we become more familiar with Islam as
a major world religion and the soon-to-be second largest faith in
America, the idea of a Judeo-Christian-Islamic religious tradition
will become more internalized. We will recognize that each faith
represents shared beliefs and values as well as distinctive differences.
Points of conflict are one part of the story but so are religious and
cultural cooperation and co-existence, past and present. Theologi-
cal similarities and competing interests put Christianity and Islam,
the West and the Muslim world on an early collision course. Both
of these major world religions had a universal message and mis-
sion, the belief that their covenant with God was the final and com-
plete fulfillment of God’s earlier revelation to a previous community
that had gone astray. We don’t often remember that while Christen-
edom experienced Islam’s expansion as a threat to its hegemony,
Islam proved more tolerant and provided greater religious freedom
for Jews and indigenous Christians, and it eliminated the persecu-
tion of heretics for which imperial Christianity was noted:

By an exquisite irony, Islam reduced the status of Christians to
that which the Christians had earlier thrust upon the Jews, with
one difference. The reduction in Christian status was merely
juridical; it was unaccompanied by either systematic persecu-
tion or a bloodlust; and generally, though not everywhere and
at all times, unmarred by vexatious behavior.¹
As it becomes more commonplace to work with Muslim colleagues and live with Muslim neighbors, it will be even more important to know about events in our history that have been overlooked. Many do not know that the development of imperial Islam and Jewish-Christian-Islamic coexistence produced a rich Islamic civilization and a religious and cultural synthesis and exchange. With significant assistance from Christian and Jewish subjects, Muslims collected the great books of science, medicine, and philosophy from the West and the East and translated them into Arabic from Greek, Latin, Persian, Coptic, Syriac, and Sanskrit. The age of translation was followed by a period of great creativity as a new generation of Muslim thinkers and scientists made their own contributions to learning: in philosophy, medicine, chemistry, astronomy, algebra, optics, art, and architecture. Then the cultural traffic pattern was again reversed when Europeans, emerging from the Dark Ages, turned to Muslim centers of learning to regain their lost heritage and to learn from Muslim advances. These historical dynamics should be kept in mind when we are tempted to view Islam and Muslims as aliens with whom we have nothing in common.

Muslims are now in a position similar to other ethnic and religious groups in their relationship to modernity. In the not too distant past, many non-WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) immigrants to America (Irish, Italian, Polish, etc.) were viewed as the other and not accepted as equals. My friends and I grew up very conscious that Catholic ethnics were seen as laborers but hardly material for Ivy League schools and corporate leadership. Years later, after I had endured a dinner party of Italian jokes and speculation that one of our prosperous neighbors must be mafia, a friend said to me, “Remember John, to them, you’re not Italian, you have a Ph.D."

Those who believe that Arab or Muslim culture is inherently incompatible with modernization need to reflect on Western attitudes toward non-Western societies in the recent past. Only a few decades ago, if you received a gift that was stamped “made in Japan” you knew you had an inferior product, a cheap imitation of goods from Paris, London, or New York. Westerners all knew that the Japanese as well as other Asian civilizations or cultures were somehow Third World, that they lacked Western knowledge, creativity, or work ethic. History now tells a different story. Today, Lexus competes head to head with Mercedes and Jaguar, and Toyota and Honda outsell American brand-name cars.

Religions like societies change and develop. Similarly, civilizations are not monolithic and static. New ideas began in one civilization—Chinese, European, or Islamic—and then spread, were appropriated, and further developed by others. Science, technology, philosophy, and morality ultimately have no fixed boundaries. They are not the preserve of any single people, civilization, or religion. Today, in a reverse process, we see the transfer of science and technology and the spread of modern notions of democratization and pluralism from the West to the Muslim world and beyond. Globalization has also resulted in collaborative efforts in modern science. Increasing numbers of Muslims are trained in the sciences, many in the best universities of America and Europe, and work in the West or in the Muslim world with multinational corporations.

To ask whether Islam is compatible with Western civilization is to ignore past and present exchanges and cross-fertilizations. It also privileges Western civilization as the universal norm and implies that civilizations are mutually exclusive and diametrically opposed. In fact civilizations and cultures overlap; they have similarities and differences. What are the essentials of Western civilization—reason, individualism, science, democracy, human rights, pluralism, secularism, capitalism? However different and diverse, most Muslims, like most people on this planet, rely on reason, science, and technology, desire greater political participation and freedom, and seek economic advancement and prosperity. At the same time, like conservative Christians and Jews, many Muslims believe that religion is under siege from secular liberalism first and foremost within their own societies.

Historically, over many decades, Christianity and Judaism made their own accommodations with modernity. The process produced
further divisions and differences among them: liberal, fundamentalist, and evangelical Protestantism; orthodox, conservative, reform, and reconstructionist Judaism; orthodox or traditionalist and liberal Catholics. Catholicism was for some time a distant third to Protestantism and Judaism in dealing with modernity. Until the second Vatican Council in the 1960s, pontiffs had condemned much of modernity—including modern biblical criticism, democracy, pluralism, and women's rights. Despite change, all of the children of Abraham continue to struggle with modernity. The global resurgence of religion is driven by a desire of many well-educated believers of different faiths to rethink and reevaluate the relationship of religion to modernity. Many question the excesses of modernity, trying to reassert a faith and values that limit the unbridled use of science and technology, the sexual freedoms that weaken family life, the emphasis on individual rights rather than on responsibilities, or the accumulation and maldistribution of wealth.

Muslims struggle with many of the same questions and issues of modernity faced by the West but with distinctive differences. They have not had the luxury of time, the centuries the West had to develop and accommodate modernity. Despite the violence we see today, however, the Muslim encounter with modernity has occurred without anywhere near the West's high cost of bloody wars (for example, the French and American revolutions, the American Civil War, and the wars of the Reformation). Furthermore, many Muslim countries face serious political and economic handicaps. The Muslim world's dominance by the West and marginalization as a world power, which has challenged Islam's relevance to modern life, and its lack of control over the forces of development have been daunting barriers to progress. When in power, Muslim empires were open and pluralistic in engaging foreign cultures and civilizations. When in charge of the process, there was little fear of loss of identity, faith, and pride. In defeat, Muslims faced questions of identity as well as faith: Does being modern mean our only option is to talk, dress, think, live and act like them? How would Americans or Europeans respond if modernization and globalization meant domination by Japan, politically, economically, militarily, linguistically, and culturally? The closest example we have in the West is perhaps the wrenching adjustment former European empires like England and France have had to make to American international ascendancy.

Religion, Modernization, and Development

Modernization or development theory in the mid-twentieth century could be summarized by the adage: "Every day in every way, things are and will continue to get more and more modern and secular," which meant better and better. It was taken for granted that modernizing meant the progressive westernization and secularization of a society: politically, economically, legally, and educationally. The choice faced by developing countries such as those in the Muslim world seemed to be between the polar dichotomies of tradition and modernity, Mecca and mechanization. Christianity encountered the same secularizing trends. Theologians spoke of demythologizing the scriptures, of a secular gospel for the modern age, of the triumph of the secular city (as opposed to Augustine's City of God), and of a "death of God theology." Religious faith was at best supposed to be a private matter. In academia, the degree of one's intellectual sophistication and objectivity was judged according to a secular liberalism and relativism that seemed antithetical to religion. In politics, while church or synagogue membership was recognized as useful, most candidates avoided discussing their faith or religious issues in public.

The global resurgence of religion in the late twentieth century has led presidents, corporate leaders, and athletes to do a wide turnaround, freely discussing their faith and morality in the media. Congressional prayer breakfasts and prayer groups of athletes, lawyers, and physicians are commonplace. A few decades ago, it was important for a president to have a church to attend on major holidays but not to profess his faith in public. Now presidents from Jimmy Carter to George Walker Bush publicly profess that
An Inevitable Clash of Civilizations?

In a controversial 1993 article, "The Clash of Civilizations?," Samuel P. Huntington warned that a "clash of civilizations will dominate global politics" and precipitated a heated worldwide debate among scholars, political leaders, commentators, and the media. Many in the Muslim world saw this important American academic and opinion maker, who had also held a prominent position in government, as articulating what they always thought was the West's attitude toward Islam. If some academics and government officials were quick to distance themselves from Huntington's position, the sales of his subsequent book, its translation into many languages, and the sheer number of international conferences and publications that addressed the question demonstrated that there was "a market for clash." The attacks of September 11 and the global threat of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda have resurrected a knee-jerk response of "the clash of civilizations" for an easy answer to the question, Why do they hate us?

Huntington, like many others today, played into old stereotypes by characterizing Islam and the West as age-old enemies—"Conflict along the fault line between Western and Islamic civilizations has been going on for 1300 years"—and by citing Islam's resistance to secular Western models as necessarily hostile to human rights and progress—"Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic [and other] . . . cultures."  

In his 1997 follow-up book, Huntington concluded that "Islam's borders are bloody and so are its innards." His blanket condemnation went beyond Islamic fundamentalism to Islam itself: "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." Though Huntington has now significantly refined his position, September 11 unleashed new, updated versions as many found it more expedient to fall back on convenient stereotypes of a monolithic Islam and historic clash of civilizations rather than to examine the complex causes of terrorism.

Ironically, the clash of cultures appears as evident with reference to our allies in the Muslim world as with our enemies. Whatever the common economic and political interests, primarily centered on oil, the contrasts between Saudi Arabia and the United States are stark. The religious and cultural traditions of America's long-time ally—religiously puritanical and exclusivist worldview, sexually segregated society, lack of political parties and elections, punishment of theft by amputation, prohibition of building churches or practicing Christianity—as well as the fact that bin Laden and so many of the hijackers of September 11 were Saudi, indicate that we live in two different worlds. Similarly, the declared war of religious extremists and terrorists against entrenched
Muslim governments and the West— all in the name of Islam— seems to underscore the incompatibility of Islam and democracy. However, while the actions of extremist groups and of authoritarian governments, religious and nonreligious, reinforce this perception of a cultural clash, the facts on the ground present a more complex picture. Neither the Muslim world nor the West is monolithic. Common sources of identity (language, faith, history, culture) yield when national or regional interests are at stake. While some Muslims have achieved a transient unity in the face of a common enemy, as in the Iranian Revolution, their solidarity quickly dissipates once danger subsides and competing interests again prevail. The evidence that there is no monolithic Islam is abundant. The inability of Arab nationalism/socialism, Saudi Arabia’s pan-Islam, or Iran’s Islamic Republic revolution to unite and mobilize the Arab and Muslim worlds, the competition and conflict between countries like Egypt, Libya, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia, the disintegration of the Arab (Iraq and the Gulf states) coalition against Iran after the Iran-Iraq war, and the subsequent Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and divisions in the Muslim world evident in the 1991 Gulf war are but a few examples. As James Piscatori observed, “The problem with assuming a unified response is that it conceals the reality of . . . entrenched national differences and national interests among Muslims.”

The failure of Osama bin Laden, like Saddam Hussein and Khomeini before him, to effectively mobilize the Islamic world in his unholy war, despite his global terrorist network, is a reminder that Muslims, like every global religious community, are indeed diverse. Moreover, as Islamic history makes abundantly clear, mainstream Islam, in law and theology as well as in practice, in the end has always rejected or marginalized extremists and terrorists from the Kharijites and Assassins to contemporary radical movements such as al-Qaeda.

In responding to the attacks of September 11, some charged that the clash of civilizations revolved around conflict with our modern Western way of life, with, for example, democracy, women’s rights, and capitalism. In fact, capitalism exists in the Muslim world both in home-grown forms as well as Western-inspired versions. The issue for many in the Muslim world is not capitalism but the dangers of Western economic hegemony and its side effects. In fact, Islam does not have any problem with many of the essentials of Western capitalism. It is important to recall that Muhammad’s early followers included prosperous merchants. He himself engaged in financial and commercial transactions to make a living. The Quran, hadith (traditions about what the Prophet said and did), and Muslim historical experience affirm the right to private property and trade and commerce. As Maxime Rodinson, a French scholar and Marxist, wrote in his Islam and Capitalism: “Economic activity, the search for profit, trade, and consequently, production for the market, are looked upon with no less favor by Muslim tradition than by the Koran itself.” Mosques throughout the world, such as the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and the magnificent mosques of old Cairo and Teheran, are often adjoined by magnificent bazaars. Traders and businessmen were among the most successful sectors in society and were responsible for the spread of their faith.

Perhaps the best response to those who ask whether Islam and capitalism are compatible is to look at the lives of the millions of Muslims who live and work in our midst in America and Europe. Many have come here to enjoy freedom and the opportunities offered by our economic and political systems. Like other religious and ethnic minorities before them, they too struggle with issues of identity and assimilation but not with their desire to enjoy the best that we represent.

Another frequently cited issue, used to demonstrate a civilizational clash, is Islam’s treatment of women. If there is one image used to depict Islam and Muslims, it is that of oppressed, gender-segregated women, covered by the veil. Rather than considering that women’s status might be caused by the continued strength of patriarchy, Islam is presumed to be particularly misogynist. Gender in Islam remains a highly charged issue today at the popular
level and among scholars and religious leaders. If some blame Islam for the oppression of women, others see it as a beacon of light and reform. Still others insist that the status and role of women in Muslim societies should be attributed primarily to socioeconomic forces rather than to religious belief. The explanations are as diverse as the Muslim world itself. Thus, charting the progress or regression of women, whether under secular or religious governments, is a tricky task. Often we compare our “ideal” to selected “realities” in other religions and cultures, overlooking the diversity that exists within them.

For several decades women in Muslim societies have been part of the dialectics of change, an erratic, vacillating, and contradictory process that creates many anomalies. In Egypt, long regarded as one of the most modernizing of Muslim states, women cannot serve as judges, and yet in Morocco more than 20 percent of judges are women. Women in Egypt and Malaysia have access to the best education and hold responsible professional positions in virtually every sector. Yet, like women in most Muslim societies, they need a male family member’s permission to travel. Women in Saudi Arabia own much of the real estate in Riyadh and Jeddah, can own businesses but cannot drive a car, are sexually segregated, and restricted to “appropriate” professions. In nearby Kuwait, women function in society, hold responsible positions in many areas, but have not been able to get the vote. In Iran, where they must wear the chador in public, women constitute the majority in universities, hold professional positions, serve in Parliament, and there is a female vice president in the Islamic republic. Though Pakistani women can vote, serve as ambassadors and as prime minister, they, particularly the poor and powerless, also suffer under Islamic laws enacted by General Zia ul-Haq and still in force. In Afghanistan, the Taliban in the name of Islam forced professional women to give up their jobs and prohibited girls from attending school.

Critics charge that fundamentalists, religious extremists, want to drive modern Muslim societies back to a medieval past. Feminist organizations from Algeria to Malaysia warn that Islamist power-sharing would reverse the educational and social gains of the post-independence period, remove women from public life, and again restrict their roles solely to that of wife and mother.

For those who wish to implement a more Islamic order, reforms affecting women and the family provide a quick fix, legitimated in religious tradition and easy to apply. Affirming the centrality of the family in Islam is both an act of piety and of political expediency. The Muslim family has long been regarded as the nucleus of the Islamic community, its identity, piety, and strength. Women as wives and mothers have played a pivotal role in the upbringing, education, and training of their families. If westernized reforms seemed to threaten the identity and values of family life, reestablishing its Islamic roots through the Islamization of the family can become the panacea. Formulating and implementing an Islamic state or returning to the use of Islamic law (Shari'ah) in politics, business, and economics has proved difficult, and so many activists have found it easier to focus on women and the family.

Viewed as culture bearers, women have been put at the center of the wars of religious and cultural identity being fought in many Muslim countries today. Sometimes they are agents of change but often they are the victims. Throughout the twentieth century, regimes have used women’s bodies to prove their modern orientation and identity. Reza Shah Pahlavi in Iran, Ataturk in Turkey, and Bourghiba in Tunisia banned or discouraged veiling and encouraged Western dress as a sign of modernity. The abolition of the veil in 1936 by Reza Shah Pahlavi has often been celebrated as a major step toward women’s emancipation. However, this reform chiefly benefited upper-class elite women. For many middle- and lower-class Iranian women, the forcible removal of the veil was traumatic. In addition, despite the shah’s modernizing symbols, the regime did not substantially change patriarchal values and attitudes (its own or those of the religious establishment): “I felt no matter what class they belonged to, women were considered as dolls and objects by their male colleagues.”

If many associate the veil with the oppression of women, others regard veiling as an authentic practice that preserves the dignity,
freedom, and modesty of women, enabling them to act and to be treated in terms of who they are and not how they look. Since the 1970s, a significant number of modern women from Cairo to Jakarta have turned or returned to wearing Islamic dress. Often this is a voluntary movement led by young, urban, middle-class women, who are well educated and work in every sector of society. In many cases, the process is distinctly modern, with new fashions and styles encompassing new understandings of the status and role of women. Such women are not passive victims of male-imposed mores but active agents for change. Some who wear Islamic dress believe that they are better able to function as active, self-directed, independent subjects, commanding respect, acknowledged and treated as persons rather than (sex) objects. Islamic dress is also used as a sign of protest and liberation. It has developed political overtones, becoming a source of national pride as well as resistance to Western (cultural as well as political) dominance and to authoritarian regimes.

A new source of women’s empowerment today has become active participation in the mosque and use of Islam’s tradition to reclaim their rights in Islam. Reformers today emphasize that just as women during the time of the Prophet prayed in the mosque, so too today they actively exercise that right. In the centuries after the death of Muhammad, women played a small but significant role as transmitters of hadith (prophetic traditions) and in the development of Sufism (Islamic mysticism). Gradually, however, women’s religious role and practice, particularly their access to education and the mosque, were severely restricted. Male religious scholars cited a variety of reasons, from moral degeneration in society to women’s bringing temptation and social discord, to restrict both their presence in public life and their access to education and the mosque.14

Today, in many Muslim countries and communities, particularly those that have been regarded as among the more modernized, such as Egypt, Jordan, Malaysia, and in the United States, women lead and participate in Quran study and recitation groups as well as in mosque-based educational and social services. In coun-

tries such as Iran, women serve as prayer leaders (imams) for congregational prayers; however, they are only permitted to lead groups of women. Female reformers look to early Islam for examples of women noted for their learning, leadership, and piety to strengthen the rationales for women’s contemporary role in public activities. Strong, public female figures during the Prophet’s time include Khadija, Muhammad’s first wife of twenty-five years, who owned her own business, in which Muhammad had been employed, and played a formative and significant role in the birth of the Muslim community. After Khadija’s death, Muhammad’s wife Aisha was very prominent as a major source of religious knowledge, an authority in history, medicine, and rhetoric.15

Though patriarchy, legitimated in the past by religion, remains very much alive as an ideology and value system, in many Muslim countries it is progressively challenged by women in the name of religion as well as for economic realities. Rather than breaking with tradition, female reformers argue that their religious activism today reclaims an ideal forgotten by later generations. As a result of this new approach, increasing numbers of women have an alternative model that enables them to broaden their expectations both inside and outside the home.

Voices of Reform and Dialogue

Because acts of violence and terrorism grab the headlines, we seem to know a lot more about Islamic advocates of a “clash,” the militant jihadists, than about those who are working toward a peaceful revolution and civilizational dialogue. Today, Islam’s encounter with the West and the need for Islamic reform are being addressed by intellectuals, religious leaders, and activists alike. Like the Islamic modernist movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and later the Islamic (fundamentalist) movements of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-i-Islami, today’s Islamically oriented intellectuals and activists continue the process of Islamic modernization and reform. However, today’s reformers represent a creative new stage in that they not only reformulate Islam con-
ceptually but also implement their ideas through their positions in government and the public arena.

Three remarkable examples reflect the diverse voices of Islamic reform and civilizational dialogue that can be heard from the Middle East to Asia.16 Active as intellectuals and politicians, Anwar Ibrahim, former deputy prime minister of Malaysia, Mohammad Khatami, president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Abdurrahman Wahid, former president of Indonesia, have played important roles in defining the terms for an intercivilizational dialogue, rather than a clash of civilizations. At the same time, each takes a position that is uniquely different from the West’s, reflective of his own culture and political environment. Though all three object to concepts of development that presume the desirability of Western secularization for Muslim societies, they recognize the strengths and weaknesses of Western-style modernity. Thus, they advocate an active two-way dialogue among civilizations, especially between Islam and the West.

ANWAR IBRAHIM: GLOBAL CONVIVENCIA

When Anwar Ibrahim, sometimes called “Malaysia’s own Islamic zealot,” joined the government of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed in 1980, he stunned friends and foes alike.17 Nevertheless, he showed that he could succeed in both worlds, rapidly evolving from a charismatic opposition leader to deputy prime minister and finance minister. Ibrahim worked effectively with diverse political forces and navigated Malaysia’s complex multireligious (Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist) and multiethnic (Malay, Chinese, Indian) society. He had impressed many at home and abroad with his ability to bridge religions and cultures and to work effectively to achieve common goals. He had earned the reputation of “an unabashed globalist well suited to the modern world of markets and media”18 and a “liberal.”19 Eighteen years later, he would be tried and convicted on politically inspired charges, an action condemned internationally by many political and religious leaders and human rights organizations. He remains, although in prison, a significant voice on issues of sociopolitical and economic development, advocating pluralism in multireligious societies and intercivilizational dialogue as the only alternative to a deadly clash of civilizations.

A pragmatic man of politics as well as of faith, Ibrahim argued that both Marxist and Western models of secular materialism had failed. “Marxism . . . severs man from his moorings in faith. . . . There was no place for ethics, morality or spirituality,”20 and the West also rejects “any reference to moral and ethical considerations. Cultural preservation is regarded as retrogressive in the march for development.”21

In contrast to more conservative Islamist groups that called for a return Islamic law, Ibrahim said,

[Southeast Asian Muslims] would rather strive to improve the welfare of the women and children in their midst than spend their days elaborately defining the nature and institutions of the ideal Islamic state. They do not believe it makes one less a Muslim to promote economic growth, to master the information revolution and to demand justice for women.22

Anwar Ibrahim’s Islam is a dynamic, developing tradition that responds to diverse times and places. He rejected the conservative imitation (taqlid) of the past in favor of independent analysis and reinterpretation (ijithad), believing that Islam is “a pragmatic religion whose real strength and dynamism was in its ongoing revitalization . . .”23 A strong proponent of East-West dialogue, he believes Islam is also inclusive, and as in the past, so too today Islam should be open to all cultures.

Pluralism and tolerance based upon mutual respect and understanding are cornerstones of Anwar Ibrahim’s vision of a civilizational dialogue or convivencia, that has deep roots in medieval Islamic history. Convivencia (living together) alludes to the spirit of Roger II’s twelfth-century Sicily and Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula in centers like Toledo, Cordoba, and Granada. In Iberia, Christians, Muslims, and Jews lived together in a context of social intercourse and cultural exchange. It was a time of prosperity and
achievement; the arts, literature, poetry, astronomy, and medicine flourished. Many Christians became known as Mozarabs because of the extent to which they adopted elements of Arab dress, culture, and language, including Arabic names. Some Christian scholars wrote in Arabic instead of Latin.

Ibrahim finds the roots of convivencia supported both in Islamic history and in the Quran, as illustrated by the verse, “Oh mankind! Verily we have created you all from a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes that you may come to know one another” (49:13).24

Convivencia, for Ibrahim, is an Islamic form of pluralism, a vision quite different from the typical Islamist programs that make a place for non-Muslims in a traditionally conceived Islamic society. It is based on the primacy of social and economic justice and equality, recognized as fundamental to other religions as well as Islam. This pluralist vision is the foundation for his call for civilizational dialogue:

For us, the divine imperative as expressed in the Qur'an is unambiguous. Humanity has been created to form tribes, races and nations, whose differences in physical characteristics, languages and modes of thought are but the means for the purpose of lita'arafa—“getting to know one another.”25

Ibrahim appreciated the urgency of diffusing global confrontations, stressing that convivencia is a necessity for progress. However, it must be an encounter among equals.26 Old Western imperialist attitudes of their “civilizing mission” as well as fundamentalist rejections of the enemy West threaten human survival.

MOHAMMAD KHATAMI:
DIALOGUE OF CIVILIZATIONS

For more than twenty years America and Iran were locked in a cycle of “mutual satanization.” Memories of the Iranian revolution, American diplomats held hostage, Iran’s ambitious attempts to export its revolution, and Ayatollah Khomeini’s fatwa condemning to death British author Salman Rushdie for his book The Satanic Verses made Iran the epitome of an Islamic global threat.

In August 1997, eighteen years after the Iranian revolution had stunned the world, the newly elected president of the Islamic Republic surprised the international community in his inaugural address. Mohammad Khatami called for a dialogue of civilizations, “in our world, dialogue among civilizations is an absolute imperative.”27 The president of a country that America labeled terrorist became one of the major advocates for a new policy debate within Iran and within the global community about the clash of civilizations.

The new climate was dramatically conveyed to the world in a televised CNN interview with Christiane Amanpour in which Khatami surprised many by stating that Western civilization and the United States were worthy of respect, citing in particular the experience of the Pilgrims at Plymouth as an important event in affirming religious freedom, and the importance of the example of Abraham Lincoln.28

Khatami articulated a distinctive alternative approach to relations between Islam and the West. The old-fashioned jihad–clash-of-civilizations perspective offered stark alternatives of victory or defeat. Khatami’s vision combined a nonmilitant jihadist defense of Islamic identity and values with a call for civilizational dialogue by which all societies could benefit through the exchange of information and ideas.29

Khatami’s model for dialogue does not preclude strong criticism of Western policies, especially those of the United States. Speaking of a flawed U.S. policy of domination, Khatami denounced America’s use of sanctions against Iran and others. America, he said, attempts to “impose their own domestic law on the world... [but the] world will not tolerate a master any more—not only will we not tolerate a master, neither will the world.”30 Thus, Khatami combines strong affirmation of Iran’s principles and critique of U.S. policy with an emphatic advocacy of the dialogue of civilizations and of improved Iranian-U.S. relations in particular.