Institute of Policy Studies

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In 1921, Albert Einstein was reported to have said something profound when he presented a paper on his then-infant Theory of Relativity, at the Sorbonne:

"If I am proved correct," Einstein said, "the Germans will call me a German, the Swiss will call me a Swiss citizen, and the French will call me a great scientist.

“If relativity is proved wrong, the French will call me a Swiss, the Swiss will call me a German, and the Germans will call me a Jew".

As you can see, religious identity and often times ethnic identity too, are attached to the negative rather than the positive, though religion itself is supposed to represent the best of and the best for humankind.

In the euphoria after the Second World War, there was indeed a period when religion, especially religious differences, were swept aside in the name of world peace, and shortly after that, in the name of the two most powerful ideologies that divided the post war world – Capitalism and Communism.

When Communism collapsed in the late 1980s and the Cold War was thought to have ended, Francis Fukuyama, one of the most brilliant analysts of contemporary world developments, declared that history had ended, at least as Hegel saw it. In his erudite though controversial book of 1992, The End of History and the Last Man, Fukuyama said:

"What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."

There was a flood of protests against Fukuyama’s declaration but most turned out to be feeble attempts to disprove him. However, there was one piece of work that responded to Fukuyama rather robustly and gained as much currency and -- I should add -- as much controversy as Fukuyama’s. This was Samuel Huntington’s writings on the Clash of Civilisations.

Huntington conceded that the age of ideology had ended, but argued that the world had in fact gone back to what it had once been – a world characterized by cultural conflict. And in his thinking, cultural conflict was much infused by religious conflict.

In 1993, Huntington wrote in a *Foreign Affairs* article:
"It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future."

Anticipating an avalanche of protests, as happened to Fukuyama, Huntington added a caveat at the end of the article. He said: "This is not to advocate the desirability of conflicts between civilizations. It is to set forth descriptive hypotheses as to what the future may be like."

As an admirer of Huntington's previous writings, I wished he had stopped there. But he went on to add something more, which really landed him on the dark side. He argued that in order to protect the safety and security of the Western civilization, the West should try "to limit the expansion of the military strength of Confucian and Islamic states; to moderate the reduction of Western military capabilities and maintain military superiority in East and Southwest Asia; to exploit differences and conflicts among Confucian and Islamic states . . ."

Not unexpectedly, there was an uproar against the Huntington thesis with one commentator calling it a Clash of Ignorance. Most people concluded, among other things, that religion and culture were simply not as powerful as economic ideologies which will pit one nation against another, much less one civilisation against other.

However, when two commercial airliners crashed into the World Trade Centre in New York City on the morning of September 11, 2001, many commentators rose to remind the world of the Huntington thesis and claimed that the Western Civilisation was indeed under attack. An attack on American soil was the ultimate act of terrorism, and terrorism was perpetuated by Islamic countries and therefore Islam was the cause of it all. So went many of the arguments.

However naive, simplistic, and even downright silly this may sound to you today, that one incident on 9/11 changed the world's thinking of a subject – indeed the subject of our conference today – religion. Religion became overnight a subject of great interest and interminable exchanges. However, most unfortunately, in many cases, the public discourse, especially in the mass media, created much more heat than illumination. The most important reason, I would like to suggest, is that most of the world media has had so little practice in reporting on religion.

You open your typical newspaper and you have sections on politics, business, sports, lifestyle and even, lo and behold, the arts and the sciences. But hardly anyone has ever had a regular section on religion.

To be sure, there are compelling reasons why our newspapers need not have a whole section devoted to religion. The demographics and the advertising rationale may not permit it. But it appears that there is a general uneasiness about reporting religion in many parts of the world. And before anyone jumps to the conclusion that it is so only in countries where religion is generally considered a taboo subject – indeed there are many such countries – even in countries where religious content is utterly uninhibited such as the one which published cartoons consider sacrilegious – indeed there are many such countries – there is little or poor public discourse on religion. The most ironic development is that even as the specialised religious media is proliferating in many countries to promote individual religions, there is no better understanding of religion in those countries. In fact, such "mine is better than yours" religious media have served to deepen and broaden the divide than bridge it.

Globalisation has brought diversity – ethnic, cultural and religious diversity – into sharp relief everywhere and it is expected that most countries on earth will have to cope with diversity to one degree or another. Erecting walls -- physical or mental -- will no longer serve the common good. Even tolerance can no longer be an operating principle, as people need to understand and appreciate the "other" in order to do their work together, to play with each other and to live as a community. Yet such understanding and appreciation would hardly materialise if there is no exchange of information, ideas and views.

However, there are those who believe that what is left unsaid would remain unknowable. And what you don't know won't hurt you. And hence the iron hand of censorship. There are those who believe anything and everything can be said in public. And hence the Danish cartoons of the Prophet. In between these extremes lie a whole range of positions on reporting religion, none of which is easy to practice nor completely risk free. Each position poses a particular dilemma for the media practitioner. Yet, if we want journalism to function as a guiding hand it must face up to those dilemmas and find the golden mean.

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