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IN the summer 1993 issue of Foreign Affairs, Samuel P. Huntington wrote his famous essay The Clash of Civilizations? Huntington argued that: "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.

"Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilisations. The clash of civilisations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilisations will be the battle lines of the future."

Huntington laid down a challenge as much as an analysis of the contemporary cultural condition of the modern world. If he is right, then our basic global conflicts are based on civilisational differences that are deeply rooted and perhaps unavoidable.

The argument pursued by Huntington is that cultural differences between civilisations are at the root of contemporary conflict and will characterise disputes of the future. For many, the tragedy of 9/11 confirmed this kind of analysis. However, a more sober study of the current nature of dissent shows this kind of view is simplistic, misleading and, more importantly, dangerous. Of the many incisive critiques of Huntington's thesis that are possible to cite, I refer readers to Edward Said's response.

Said, who wrote a stinging critique of Huntington's thesis in The Nation magazine, pointed out that in Huntington's essay: "the conflict between two of them, Islam and the West gets the lion's share of his attention". In this belligerent kind of thought, he relies heavily on a 1990 article by the veteran Orientalist Bernard Lewis, whose ideological colours are manifest in its title, The Roots of Muslim Rage.

"In both articles, the personification of enormous entities called "the West" and "Islam" is recklessly affirmed, as if hugely complicated matters such as identity and culture existed in a cartoon-like world where Popeye and Bluto bash each other mercilessly, with one always more virtuous pugilist getting the upper hand over his adversary." (The Nation magazine, The Clash of Ignorance, Oct 4, 2001, page 1).

Said's response to the oversimplifications and belligerency represented by the kind of thinking shared by Huntington and Orientalists such as Lewis reminds me of the great French historian Fernand Braudel's lament that, "like other social specialists, historians who have concerned themselves with civilisation have left us in great uncertainty as to what they actually mean by it." (On History, translated by Sarah Matthews, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, page 184).

The broad sweep and massive generalisations that Huntington's thesis relies on are based on massive understatements and highly problematic propositions both in regard to culture and history.

Said captures the issue when he declares, "Certainly neither Huntington nor Lewis has much time to spare for the internal dynamics and plurality of every civilisation, or for the fact that the major contest in most modern cultures concerns the definition or interpretation of each culture, or for the unattractive possibility that a great deal of demagogy and downright ignorance is involved in presuming to speak for a whole religion or civilisation." (The Clash of Ignorance, page 1).
Recently moderate and considered voices have reminded us that small minorities do not represent the majority opinions and that acts of extremists whether they are the ignorant antics of "know nothing" zealots who seek to burn the Holy Quran in an effort to gain publicity or fanatics who drive planes into tall buildings are simply that: the acts of unrepresentative diehards who stand for little other than their own misinformed and despicable selves (www.nst.com.my/nst/articles/26dz/Article/).

It is important to recognise that the acts of extremists, who claim to act as proxy for the majority opinion, should be seen for what they are.

One of the problems we face in trying to educate our fellow citizens in rejecting the idea that these fanatics embody anything more than a small fringe element is the fact that they often receive publicity way beyond their actual importance.

A small unknown and insignificant pastor in a backwoods location garners worldwide attention for a stunt that in no way represents the opinions of the majority of co-religionists he claims to belong too.

Why? Is it because extreme acts when publicised sell newspapers and make good evening news footage? Could it be that what we consider as newsworthy is now dominated by its shock value?

Is it possible that the need to titillate and surprise consumers of news means that what is extreme or insulting sells?

News becomes characterised not by its significance, but rather by its ability to entertain, and astound.

The consequences of this reduction of "news" to entertainment is, however, not trivial.

News that overemphasises the shocking and lurid at the expense of the substantial and significant can lead many of us to have a distorted view of each other and the nature of the world we live in.

It tends to reinforce the sense that we live in a world dominated by extremes. Moderate voices, which are in fact representative of the overwhelming majority, get drowned out by the need to push copy and publicise the most spectacularly unrepresentative crackpot.

So where to start? One place is with the media. Perhaps the media could ask themselves the following questions: to what extent is our assessment of what constitutes news formed by its intrinsic importance and service to the public interest?

To what degree is the news we are promoting really a form of vulgar entertainment?

It is also important that our political leaders work towards marginalising extremists and reclaiming the centre.

Clearly there is a need for political commitment to address the problem of extremism.

The recent speech by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak at the 65th United Nations General Assembly represents a political step in the right direction.

Not only does it challenge the view that our conflicts depict an essential "clash of civilisations", it also properly recognises that the moderate majority are representative and must work together to challenge, overcome and stand up to the extreme minority.
Najib argues quite correctly that: "It is time for moderates of all countries and religions to take back the centre, to reclaim the agenda for peace and pragmatism, and to marginalise the extremists." (www.nst.com.my/nst/articles//Najiburgesworld__8217_smoderatestoworktogetherootomeextremists/Article/#ixzz11BqcQsXu).

Of course, the issue of overcoming extremism and recognising the fact that fanatics do not represent the majority, let alone a "civilisation", cannot be solved only by media.

Politicians also cannot tackle it by themselves, and many of them are not above reproach.

We need to address the problem not simply as a political or media issue but also as an educational one. Ultimately our understanding, empathy and respect for each other must be rooted in a well-informed and balanced education.

The actions of a fanatical few can only be sustained by ignorance. It cannot be stressed enough that the antidote to bigotry, ignorance and extremism lies in education.

This does not mean that having an education precludes one from advocating oversimplifications. Said's critique of The Clash of Civilisations reminds us of that. However, on balance, education is still our best bet.

Advancing mutual regard and respect and challenging what Charles Taylor -- in his New Straits Times opinion -- rightly summarised as, "utterly ignorant stupidity" is a crucial goal of education (www.nst.com.my/nst/articles/Buildingsolidarityinapluralistage/Article/).

More focus should be placed upon it.

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