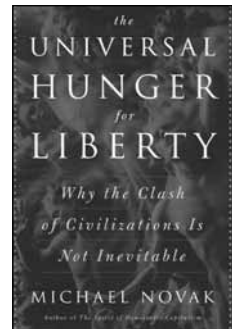


RECOMMENDED READING

# The Universal Hunger for Liberty: Why the Clash of Civilizations Is Not Inevitable

by Michael Novak (2004, 281 pages)



REVIEWED BY BOWEN H. "BUZZ" MCCOY, CRE



This is an essentially hopeful book, from both an intellectual and a spiritual point of view, at a time when we need one. It counter-balances such works as Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* and Francis

Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*. It should be particularly useful to those CREs who are planning to attend the High Level conference in 2006, "Clash of Cultures: Understanding Life in the Global Village."

Michael Novak currently holds the George Frederick Jewett Chair in Religion, Philosophy and Public Policy at the American Enterprise Institute. He won the prestigious Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion in 1994, and he has received 23 honorary degrees in the U.S. or abroad. He has written 25 books, including *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*. He has served as Ambassador to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and as head of the U.S. Delegation to the Conference on Security Cooperation in Europe, under both Democrat and Republican leaders. Political leaders from Margaret Thatcher to Vaclav Havel have recognized him for contributions to our further understanding of current religious, economic and political thought.

His thesis in the current volume is that the racial and religious differences that divide our world into clashing cultures are less important than the primary hunger for personal dignity, and for the personal liberty from which that dignity springs. He applies this cultural inclusiveness in particular to the Islam world.

He states that secularization no longer works and that a truly universal civilization will have to respect the world's great religions. According to the secularization thesis, advanced societies become ever less religious, ever more this-worldly, ever less in need of God. Yet religious fervor and ethnicity seem to be enjoying a vigorous revival. Secularism offers no answer to moral relativism. Novak goes on to state that, seeming to be non-judgmental, secularism applies no break to cultural and moral decline and offers little potential for cultural reawakening, conversion and renewal. Further, secularization has pitifully little to say about the most important things, such as death, suffering, weakness, and moral failure. It says even less about nobility of soul, the love of God, the nothingness and darkness in which God is found, the universal phenome-

## About our Featured Columnist

Bowen H. "Buzz" McCoy is a retired investment banker and former President of the Counselors.

non of prayer, or any widespread sense of an inner human unity.

The Islamic question is at the center of the book. Can Islam come to terms with democracy? Novak answers with guarded optimism, rejecting the secularist models of Turkey and Egypt. He states that in not a few Islamic lands, during the past century, in the name of secularization, religion has also been brutally suppressed. This enforced secularism did much to turn devout Muslims away from the secular Arab state and to inspire political radicals to cling to religious Islam, which they then twisted to their own political purposes.

There are intellectual resources contained within Islam that may lead to a Muslim defense of several ideas crucial to democracy. These include the dignity of the individual, consultative government attuned to the common good, religious liberty and the fundamental equality of all human beings before God.

Bernard Lewis, the noted Islamic scholar whom Novak quotes, points to several elements in Islamic law and tradition that could assist the development of a form of democracy. Among these are five in particular: Islamic tradition strongly disapproves of arbitrary rule. There is need for continuing consent. There is no duty to obey a sinful law. Difference of opinion within a community is a sign of God's mercy. The tradition stresses the dignity and humility of all citizens.

Novak points out that recent polls in Iraq show a 40 percent belief that democracy will succeed. He concludes that this is not a chance to be missed.

Bringing his thesis back to home, he states that ours is one of the two or three most religious nations on the planet. He endorses de Tocqueville's claim that the first political institution of American democracy is religion, specifically Christian and Jewish. On any given weekend more Americans attend religious services than watch football on television both Saturday and Sunday together. Five times more American go to church each week than go to movies. The religious factor might be the single most important factor in American electoral politics. The American democracy is shaped upon beliefs of human dignity, equality and liberty formed out of a prior belief in the religion of the Hebrew and Christian Bible.

Even for those who do not believe in God, an ideal of universal friendship, or at least universal respect, as well as the

undeniable fact of reflection and choice among human beings everywhere, might well have trans-cultural validity.

Novak provides powerful insights into the interplay of religion, economics, culture, and democracy in the global world of the 21st century. We need three kinds of liberty: cultural, political, and economic. Cultural liberty is moral liberty, a personal liberty, a liberty of conscience, of ideas. We need to have a chance to reject or approve our rulers, and we need economic liberty, the right to pursue our initiative. An economy based on invention and discovery is a whole new idea in history. What makes capitalism is invention and discovery.

He utilizes the Catholic church as a proxy for Islam in the Catholic movement in the 20th century away from support of socialism to a recognition of the positive aspects of capitalism for a democratic society.

Novak stresses that business is a noble Christian vocation, a work of social justice, and the single greatest institutional hope of the poor of the world. If the poor are to move out of poverty, no other institution can help them as much as business, especially small business.

Business corporations themselves are important sources of moral teaching. They are schools of cross cultural cooperation, habits of teamwork and self discipline, prudence, modesty, and peaceful methods of persuasion.

Novak concludes that in trying to reach a global moral vision, it is not necessary to discover common principles, or a lowest common denominator, on which everyone can agree. Different traditions have different means of expressing common ideals. All the world's major religious bodies have significant insights to contribute.

I find it entirely plausible that religion is a key determinant in how societies choose to organize themselves. It is also plausible that there is, within the theology of Islam, ample wisdom as well as a sufficiency of laws and enduring principles which could sustain a democratic society. Some of the more enlightened Arabs with whom Novak met felt their religion must be brought up to date from the 9th century to the 21st century. Let us hope that such enlightenment succeeds in places like Afghanistan and Iraq. Novak's contribution is that within the seeds of their faith lies the promise of such a transformation. ■