

# Real Presences and Real Absences: Civilization, Miracles, and the War Against the Family

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## Introduction

Perhaps the most exciting book I have read since we entered the third millennium is by American professor Samuel P. Huntington, the *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. It excited me enormously, intellectually and emotionally, not because, God forbid, I agree that civilizations must clash—I certainly do not believe that. On the contrary, I believe human civilizations must live in peaceful coexistence, harmony, dialogue and friendship—indeed, I am personally committed to the idea not of a clash but of an alliance of civilizations, as it will become clear later on. Nonetheless, Huntington's work is impressive in so many ways, shot through as it is with stimulating intuitions and insights, an open challenge to the political correctitudes and the pious prejudices of the stultifying Spirit of the Age.

One of these insights, which is germane to my theme, can be found in the sixth chapter, where Huntington discusses what he calls "the politics of identity":

Cultural identity is the central factor shaping a country's associations and antagonisms. The old Cold War question, Which side are you on? has been replaced by the much more fundamental one, Who are you? Every state, every country has to have an answer. That answer, its cultural identity, defines that state's place in world politics, its friends, and its enemies.

The writer goes on to provide a long list of countries where in the 90s questions of national identity came to the fore, countries that suffered from an identity crisis—countries such as Algeria, China, Canada, Germany, Great Britain, Iran, Japan, Mexico, Ukraine and, significantly, the United States—and then he adds, crucially, "In coping with an identity crisis what counts for people are blood and beliefs, *faith and family*" (emphasis added).

Faith and family. You will see, I hope, one of the reasons why reading Huntington thrills me. Faith and family. How refreshing to hear that from an eminent political scientist. That religion, the family, and family values are amongst the most fundamental, essential features of what constitutes cultural identity, indeed civilization, you might say, is a fine example of "re-inventing the wheel"—rediscovering the obvious—but I fear this particular obvious cries out to be rediscovered when powerful forces in the west work actively and indefatigably, day and night, to contradict, undermine, and destroy its reality.

Elsewhere in his book, Huntington refers to the crisis

of the family in western society. He himself does not use the expression "war against the family." That is my coinage. It is one of the three main categories or ideas forming the framework of my presentation. First, the idea of a real presence, second, the idea of war, and third, the idea of a miracle.

## The War Against the Family

I shall begin, like Homer's *Odyssey*, in midstream. Namely, with the notion, the fact, of a war against the family. However, I am not going to say very much about it. And that is because I am bold enough to take for granted that we all basically agree with that. I am pretty sure this is a conviction we all share. The traditional, natural family is, has been under attack for a long time. There is in our western societies a deeply perverse, deliberate, self-destructing, declared and undeclared war against the family and its core values. I trust your very presence—a real presence—here today suggests you share this belief.

Of course, I could back up my claim with a welter of evidence, facts and figures, data, statistics, and so on. I could tell you that, to speak only of the neck of the woods where I come from, the proportion of families headed by two parents in the UK has fallen from 92 percent in 1971 to 74 percent today. That a third of households consists of single people living alone. (A sobering fact, when you remember that "family" in English comes from the Latin "*familia*, meaning a "household.") That 28 percent of children with married parents can expect their parents to divorce before the age of sixteen. That families headed by unmarried mothers are up from 2 percent in 1981 to 9 percent. That step families account for 6 percent of all families. That since 1971 the number of women cohabiting has risen from 3 to 16 percent. That in 2000, 36 percent of all marriages took place in churches—and this is 60 percent down since 1971.

I could also mention a recent report, published by the House of Commons Health select committee, a real bombshell, that describes a public sexual health crisis. A crisis about sexually-transmitted diseases (The Catholic magazine the *Tablet* called it a "portrait of an unchaste nation."). Increase in gonorrhoea by 87 percent; chlamydia by 10 percent (That means one in ten women in the UK are now affected by it.) Syphilis cases are up by 486 percent—five fold! HIV infections: 6,500 new cases last year. The clinics are unable to cope with the referral of patients, so that many patients are turned away. Other recent figures show that the rate of teenage pregnancy continues to rise in girls under sixteen. I could go on piling up fact and figures, but

I will not do that—I feel it would be superfluous. Come on, let us face it, we already know what it all amounts to: there are forces in our societies waging a war against the family.

Of course, at this point I imagine a skeptic piping up. “All these data, never mind how unpalatable, denote social change. Social trends. Changing social mores. Why do you call it war?” My answer may strike you as a bit brazen. It is that it is self-evident to me that it is so. Take public policy. The rights and privileges that used to be granted to married couples and parents have been either abolished or transferred away from them to people living in what fashionable jargon calls “relationships.” Again, examples are innumerable—I have a bulging file to prove that—but a single one will suffice here. A recent attempt in England and Wales to change the adoption law to make unmarried couples eligible to adopt children. And when I say “unmarried couples,” beware that it means not only heterosexual but also homosexual couples. Even the church into which I was ordained—the Church of England, an ancient, formerly honorable and robust Christian body—in a report commissioned by the Bishop of Guildford, John Gladwin, said that clergy should cut their emphasis on marriage. Clergy, the report says, should spend more pastoral time with those involved in “non-married adult relationships,” such as lone parents, cohabiting couples, and lesbian and gay couples.

That is not to say, to be fair, that there are not other voices within Anglicanism that do not speak the truth, loud and clear, about the mess we are in. Archbishop Peter Jensen, of Sydney, Australia, for example, strikes me as tremendously clear-sighted, when he wrote, “Even passing knowledge of the sexual mores of young people in western society indicated a potentially ‘lost generation,’ lost because of a loss of moral compass. In a way, the sexual behaviour of modern westerners, resembles the promiscuity that characterised much of the Roman world.’ And we all know what happened to the Roman world of course: it collapsed. It fell to the barbarians.

Again, the skeptic, I imagine, could come back and insist that “I still don’t see why you are justified in speaking of a war. You have cited examples of liberalizing policies and attitudes by both church and state. They just recognize and adapt to social changes. Don’t call it a war.”

Well, you know, at this stage I am reminded of what Colin Powell, U.S. Secretary of State, declared on TV in the aftermath of 9/11, when the Twin Towers’ ruins were still smoldering. He was questioned about the appropriateness of speaking of a “war” against terrorism. The interviewer had objected to the phrase—“how could there be such a war? War is by definition between states. War should be declared” and so on, carping. Powell cut through the waffle. He said, “I don’t care about definitions. Look at the realities. At the bombed Twin Towers, at the Pentagon, at the hijacked planes: America is under attack. Call it

something else if you like. It doesn’t change the facts. It is a war. What else?”

So, no matter what you call it, this is a war. A real war. A war against a real presence. Against the natural, traditional family. The real family.

### Real Presences

An aside. Let me share with you an anecdote. When I told a parishioner the title of this paper and that I was going to bring in the idea of a miracle, he looked surprised. “Real Presence? Miracle? You mean, you are going to speak about the doctrine of transubstantiation? To a meeting hosted by a Latter-day Saint university? Wow! Isn’t that a bit far-out, Father Frank?”

Well, thanks to information kindly supplied to me by my good friend Dr. Allen Christensen, I know what Latter-day Saint theology teaches about Holy Communion. But worry not. The way I am going to use the expression real presence is not to commit myself to any particular view about the Eucharist—although of course, as an Anglican priest belonging by training to the Anglo-Catholic fold within the broad bosom of the Church of England, I naturally incline to a “high” theology of the sacrament. The reason why I am stimulated to make use of the idea of a real presence actually owes something to the writings of the Jewish intellectual and veritable polymath George Steiner. In a book of the same title, *Real Presences*, Steiner laments the loss of meaning in western culture. He is pained by it. He is pained by the post-modern attempts to deconstruct fundamental, core concepts like truth, value, morality, objectivity, God, beauty, history, knowledge, any assumption of real meaning in life and language.

These are key categories that inject real meaning and purpose into a human existence that would otherwise appear one of a pointless solipsism. Well, postmodernists flatly deny any real meanings to such concepts. Indeed postmodernism, according to Steiner, construes meaning “as a theological concept.” By which they mean, perversely, not a systematic study and reflection on, and a science of, God but a “theological delusion.” For the postmodernists, in other words, such ideas denote not real presences but real absences. Truth, value, ethics, aesthetics, objectivity, knowledge, and so on denote absences because God is absent. (Although from the way, I would say the ferocity in which they propound them, they strike me as if they may well be described not just any absences but as *real* absences.) Against the deconstructionists, Steiner writes somewhat mystically, or cabalistically, of language, of words evoking not real absences but real presences—above all, the presence of the spiritual. Meaning, he claims, is a theological concept. But, *pace* the deconstructionists, in his scheme that is a necessary, essentially good thing. To deny the existence of God, Steiner writes, is also a denial of the possibility of coherent rational discourse. Indeed, he is not afraid, as a

secular Jew, to refer to that Logos sung in the opening chapter of the gospel according to St John: *In the beginning was the Word*. In the beginning, before creation, there was not a nothing—remember the philosopher Leibnitz’s celebrated question: “Why is there something rather than nothing? Why is there a world, rather than no world? Why?”—then there was a something.

And that something was the Logos, the Word. (Permit me briefly to mention at this stage how even in the Muslim tradition, that of course rejects the Incarnation, there has been since the rise of Islam a school of theologians who taught about the uncreated Qur’an, the eternal word of God, predating creation, and kept in heaven.) So, the argument goes, somewhere, hidden in the very nature of language, in the very possibility of real meaning, Steiner suggests, glows transcendence. A hint—and more than a hint—of real meaning, real truth, real presence, the presence of the Logos, the Divine Word of God—as St John proclaims: “In the beginning was the Word.”

The aesthetic experience, the experience of art and literature, Steiner boldly contends, is mimetic, imitative of the original act of creation. And art is mysterious because creation is mysterious. The freedom of artistic creation suggests the freedom of the creator of the world. Steiner senses the presence, the real presence, of something *other* in a work of art, like a sort of background radiation of the original act of the creator. Like the holy icons of the Orthodox Eastern Church, works that not only portray but also somehow spiritually make present the holy realities they depict, art both implies and introduces us into a presence, a real presence. The presence of the Transcendent.

#### *Real Presences*

One of these real presences, I wish to maintain in this paper, is the family. A presence that so many in our culture are at work to undermine, to ruin, to turn into an absence, but a presence that stubbornly refuses to go away. Not in itself a transcendent presence, no—an immanent, a natural one—but certainly one that originates from the very intention, the will, the operation of the Transcendent. (As Holy Scripture, the Book of Genesis, tells us: “So God created man in his own image; male and female he created them.” And again, “therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh.”)

It is at this point that I want to illustrate my point—the difference between real presences and real absences—by a perhaps unusual aesthetic example. Aesthetics, the principle of the beautiful, the doctrine of good taste and its appreciation, being of course one of the real presences which postmodernism has sought to deconstruct, to uglify and nullify, to turn into a real absence. I have therefore selected four works of art, four paintings, four historical family portraits from the vast collection of the National Portrait Gallery in London. These four are a tiny selection

out of 125 family portraits in the collection. The first shows the family of Thomas More, canonized as St. Thomas More. More, the English scholar, writer, and statesman, Lord Chancellor of England between 1529–32. The portrait shows five generations of the More family. It does not depict an actual family gathering. It was commissioned by Thomas More II, the grandson of the Catholic martyr, sixty years after Mores’ death.

My second portrait (painted in 1628) shows the Duke of Buckingham and his family. It shows the Duke; his son George, as a baby, who become the second duke; his daughter, Mary, Duchess of Richmond; the duchess, his wife Katherine. George Villiers, first Duke of Buckingham, was a favorite of King James I. He was knighted in 1615, made a viscount, an earl, and a marquess successively. He was created Duke of Buckingham in 1623. Three years after this portrait was made, the Duke was assassinated at Portsmouth—a second son was born posthumously. Buckingham Palace, the London residence of the British monarch since 1837, was built for another duke in the early seventeenth century, by the way.

The third family portrait is that of the Sharp family, by the painter Joseph Zoffany. Zoffany was a German who received the patronage of King George III and painted several portraits of the Royal family. It is, as you can see, a rather crowded painting. The Sharp family gave fortnightly (oh, yes, that means every two weeks) concerts as an orchestra from 1750 onwards. This conversation piece was commissioned by William Sharp, surgeon to George III. It is one of Zoffany’s masterpieces. It shows a concert the family gave on a barge at Fulham. Sharp, the patriarch, is standing at the tiller, hat raised. Of his three brothers, Dr. John Sharp is on the right. Granville Sharp, the famous philanthropist and slavery abolitionist holds his favorite flageolet (a small flute blown at the end, like a recorder but with two thumb-holes) with one hand, his clarinet being nearby on the piano, while James Sharp, an engineer holds that old type of wind instrument called the serpent. Three Sharp sisters complete the orchestra: Elizabeth at the piano, Judith with music in hand, and above to the right, Frances, with a thurbo.

Fourth and last, the Novello family (1830). Vincent Novello was an organist, conductor, composer, and teacher. He was born of an Italian father and English mother.

#### **Real Absences**

As I said, I have picked these four family groups out of 125 in possession of the historical National Portrait Gallery. But the gallery also has a very modern section. A contemporary section where many fine, as well as trashy, portraits are permanently exhibited. There you can admire a vast gallery of familiar, present-day icons and celebrities, ranging from the late Diana, Princess of Wales, to the ever-present PM, Tony Blair. Plenty of presences, real and not so real, indeed. But, if you are observant—you don’t need to

be a sleuth, a present-day Sherlock Holmes, just a normally observant human being—you might also detect an absence, a real absence—an absence too glaringly real and glaringly absent to be fortuitous: there are no family portraits. No family portraits at all in the contemporary section of the National Portrait Gallery. None at all. I wonder how a present-day Leibnitz, a philosopher of aesthetics, might phrase it: why is there nothing rather than something?

Why is there not a single family portrait displayed in the exhibition? Why isn't there? Whether or not I am guilty of a non sequitur here, frankly, I do not care. Logic or not, for me this absence is emblematic. Emblematic of a policy to promote an absence, a real absence. An absence which I find impossible not to conclude it to be deliberate. A conscious decision. A matter of policy. Both descriptive of sad changes in our society but also prescriptive. Consciously aimed at downplaying the importance of the family concept not just in art but in general.

Call me paranoid; I do not see it as mere coincidence that a fine brochure by the National Gallery, *Family Fortunes*, accompanying a 2001 exhibition of the same title, begins with a real presence, a charming representation of the Holy Family by the sixteenth-century Italian painter Federico Barocci, and ends with a charmless, roughly-sketched, crude daub entitled *We are a Family*. In fact, that family is not a real family. It is no family at all. It shows not a natural family, but three single mothers. The painter—I certainly wouldn't call him artist—apparently took his inspiration from a photograph that warned about the problems of teenage pregnancy. He deliberately twisted the sense of that original image, inverted it, turning what was a healthy warning again into what the National Gallery brochure calls, in the flatulent, obfuscating, politically correct verbiage we are all too familiar, “a colourful, seemingly spontaneous, celebration of life and motherhood.” Well, maybe not quite a war, but certainly a guerrilla raid against the real family.

At this point you may well ask: What is to be done? How are we to defend the natural family against the assaults of its deadly enemies? Please, note: I have said the *natural* family. You may feel my argument so far has relied perhaps excessively on hazy mystical or intuitive ideas like that of a real presence, real absence, aesthetics, and so on. So, let me make it clear that I think of the family as something willed by God, yes, but also something very natural, rooted as it is in a God-created human nature, and, as such necessary for human flourishing. On this, you can't beat the account given by St. Thomas Aquinas. As John Finnis, Oxford professor of law and legal philosophy, admirably shows in his book *Aquinas*:

Families are contingent in the sense that each is formed by free choices—in the central case, by the free choice of a man and a woman to enter upon that sort of reproductive and educative partnership that is also the clos-

est form of friendship. But families are non-contingent (*i.e.*, they are necessary) in the sense that they directly instantiates a basic human good—the good described as marriage itself. . . . No one is born without a mother and a father; the nurture without which no one survives cannot be more perceptively, lovingly and fittingly provided than by a virtuous and capable mother and father, this mother and this father.

Indeed, Aquinas writes that “human beings are by nature more conjugal than political.” The family, essentially husband, wife, and children, is antecedent to, and more necessary than, political society, because oriented around acts of procreation and nurture necessary for life itself.

What is to be done? An answer would be to say that it is to do what you and I are already doing. What the World Family Policy Forum is so valiantly doing. What bodies like SPUC—the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child—are doing. What the admirable Family Education Trust—Family and Youth Concern—are laboring for in the UK. What you and I are doing. The list could go on. But, you know, the forces we are up against are massive. What we need to turn the tide is something special. Very special indeed. What we need is a *miracle*, no less.

### The Family and the Miracle

Yes, a miracle. I could forgive some of you for being like the man on that aircraft that had developed some serious trouble in flight. The whole thing was rocking with turbulence. After a number of reassuring messages the captain's voice came through: “Ladies and gentleman, I am sorry. The situation is very bad. We have tried everything. Our only hope now is to trust in God.”

“Gee!” groaned a passenger. “Is it really that bad?”

Let us face it, when people get to the point they begin to pray for a miracle, well, it often means the situation is pretty desperate, hopeless, perhaps.

However, cheer up! The good news is—the miracle has already happened. We already have the miracle. I do mean that. The miracle we need has taken place already. What we have to do is something less supernatural, more pragmatic, more empirical. First, we have to recognize it as a miracle and, second, we have to take full advantage of it. “There is a tide in the affairs of men,” writes Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar*. We must catch the tide, not let slip the opportunity this miracle offers us. To reverse the situation. To fight back the forces that are hell-bent in destroying the family. To rout them and roundly defeat them.

So, what is this miraculous event the recognition of which is so vital to our common battle? It is time for me to stop keeping you in suspense. This miracle is something about a presence in our midst. A real presence. A presence called Islam.

I started this paper by quoting Huntington's book. He hedges his bets by stating that he does not advocate such

a collision of civilizations, that he is only describing it. Actually, I believe he is doing more than that. The civilization danger to which he devotes most of his attention is of course Islam. I have already stated I radically disagree with Huntington on this. My position I have made clear at the outset. But I want to go further. I passionately believe in and advocate not a clash but an alliance between us—western, Christian, ethical people who care about the family—and Islam, one-fifth or more of humanity.

It would take me too far afield to lay out the grounds of my position in detail. The commonalities of interests between Christianity and Islam seems to me sufficient to justify my belief in the necessity of an alliance between us. Indeed, Islam's influence in the world today is not restricted to itself, but it is part of what Gilles Kepel, quoted by Huntington, has called *La Revanche de Dieu*: God's backlash, as I would call it. The rise, the revival of religion and religious movements and phenomena throughout the world. Here I am going to restrict myself to our theme: the family.

In Islam, as in Christianity, the family is a divinely inspired and divinely ordained institution. An institution that came into existence with the creation of man and woman. The Qur'an calls marriage a *hisn*, a castle, a fortress, a protection "against the life of sin" (4:25). And the Prophet Muhammad, quite apart from his personal example, is reported in many a *hadith*, or authoritative saying, part of his *Sunnah*, or tradition, as most strongly commending marriage. I shall cite only one about that institution which is the basis of family life: "There has not been created any institution in Islam which is more favoured by God than marriage" (*Wasil al-Shia*, v1.14, p. 3).

As the contemporary Islamic scholar, Hammudah Abd-Al-Afi, explains in his *Family Structure of Islam*, the detailed system of rules for Muslim family life, from marriage and divorce to matters of inheritance, to parent-child relations, the right of orphans, the mixing of the sexes and so on, are designed to foster the integrity of the family in every way.

Islam, as we all know, is a strong, growing religion. One of the reasons why that is so, I am sure, is because of the strength of presence. A real presence. The presence of the family within it. Islam is strong because of real presence in its midst. That real presence that is the family. It is because of its stable, ultimately divine law-based system of domestic and interpersonal relationships that Islam grows and it is strong. And the high growth rate of the population in Muslim countries is an index, a measure of that strength.

Islam is no longer a religion confined to Middle Eastern exotic parts. Their presence in Europe is a real presence. Millions of Muslims today inhabit European countries. Fidelity to their religion is real and strong. Their influence, electoral, political and cultural, is already making itself felt. I suggest their support is vital to our struggle.

Some far-sighted persons in the Muslim community, I am glad to say, advocate that, too. Muslim organizations already cooperate, even stand shoulder to shoulder with Christians on many key issues and values like abortion, peace, justice, education, faith schools, and social and personal morality. I recently received an appeal by Dr. Majid Katmi in which he urged all of us "to come out, for the sake of our children, for the health of our children and our nation, to show society the only way blessed by God in sexual matters: abstinence, chastity, and fidelity in marriage." Amen to that.

The idea of an alliance between civilizations or religions may appear whimsical, grandiose, or over ambitious—call it what you will. But my proposal is a practical one, based on one specific, all-important common interest and concern: the family and its values. And of course, this is not an exclusive alliance. All concerned people, of whatever religion, would be welcome, indeed, warmly invited, to join it.

Let me finish with a quotation from the Bard, William Shakespeare, just to underline the urgency of our task and the critical importance that we take advantage of the miracle: the real presence of strong, fellow monotheist believers in our midst. It should incite us not to miss this opportunity. It is Brutus who speaks, in Julius Caesar:

There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and miseries. On such full sea we are now afloat, and we must take the current where it serves, or (God forbid—this is me, not the Bard) lose our ventures.