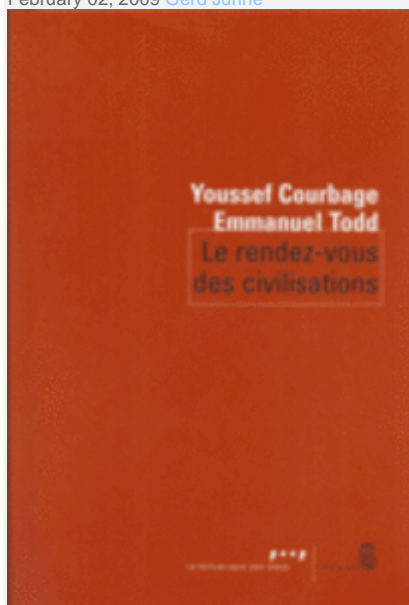


# Demographers do not see a 'clash of civilizations'

## ***A review of *Le Rendez-vous des civilisations* by Youssef Courbage and Emmanuel Todd***

*Demographic data suggest that the world is not facing a 'clash of civilizations' between the Muslim and western world, according to Youssef Courbage and Emmanuel Todd. In their book, Courbage and Todd compare trends in Islamic nations with those of other countries. Parts of the Muslim world show a certain lag in the increase of literacy, a decline in the number of children born per couple, changing gender roles and shifting political ideologies. The overall pattern, however, is not much different from other parts of the world. The demographic development of Tunisia and Iran, for example, does no longer differ from that of France.*

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Courbage and Todd see a close link between patrilineal family structures and authoritarian political systems. If this link exists, then the message is very reassuring: around the world, as literacy rates rise, especially among women, families tend to have fewer children. This reduction has undermined patrilineal systems – which have a much longer tradition in the Middle East than Islam – because families with fewer children have less chance of producing a male heir.

That an increase in female literacy has a big impact on family size is widely accepted. In their book, Courbage and Todd show that an increase in male literacy also has a strong effect. In quite a number of countries with increasing male literacy, the number of children per family started to decline even before female literacy had reached 50%, and the decline is not just a function of economic development.

Courbage and Todd argue that an independent 'mental development' takes place that is related to, but not fully dependent on, economic growth. History has shown that a decline in the number of children born per family has in most cases followed a process of secularization. Courbage and Todd see this taking place in the Muslim world. Increasing Muslim fundamentalism is not proof of the contrary but should be seen as a reaction to secularization. Secularization and fundamentalism, in the authors' view, are just two sides of the same coin.

Two specific developments have slowed down the decline of fertility in the Middle East, however. The sudden rise of oil prices in the 1970s led to higher incomes in the second half of the decade, and to more children per family in the Arab world. But when the price of oil fell in the 1980s, the average number of children in 13 Arab countries declined noticeably within only four years (between 1985-1989). A factor working in the opposite direction is that communities under threat tend to have more children. Palestinians, for example, live under dire circumstances and, despite being the most educated people in the Arab world, have a large number of children. They see themselves as in a kind of demographic race with the Jewish population of Israel, competing for soil and influence. Religion in general does have an impact on demographic development, and Islam is not different in this respect from other beliefs. Religion gives meaning to life, and as such, it supports procreation. Greater differences exist within the great religions than between them – between Protestants and Catholics, and between Shiites and Sunnis. In this sense, the authors support the ideas that Dieter Senghaas expressed in his book *The Clash Within Civilisations*. But over time, these differences tend to vanish, too. In the long run, the authors see a worldwide convergence of family size, a process to which they attribute far-reaching political consequences: the period of transition may be indeed be fraught with violent conflicts, but more within the affected countries than with the outside world.

Youssef Courbage and Emmanuel Todd (2007) *Le rendez-vous des civilisations*. Seuil.

Dieter Senghaas (2002) *The Clash within Civilizations. Coming to Terms with Cultural Conflicts*. Routledge.

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