

On History, Progress, and Civilization

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Abstract

Is history progressive? Does progress lead to civilization? If history is progressive and progress leads to civilization, why then do civilizations rise and fall in history? These questions lead to more questions. What is progress? High rise buildings? Increase in economic and material production? Increase in longevity? Does progress lead to easing life? If it leads to easing life, does it bring happiness in human lives? Is there a crisis of civilization in our times? If there is, is there a remedy for this crisis?

These questions have been raised and discussed extensively by historians and philosophers of history, and yet the debate has not ended. In fact as the twentieth century approached its end, the debate seemed to have become more and more live and controversial. Let us browse through the last two decades of this controversy.

Robert Nisbet, in his *History of the Idea of Progress* (1980) entitled the last chapter “Progress at Bay,” and concluded that:

[t]he scepticism regarding western progress that was once confined to a very small number of intellectuals in the nineteenth century has grown and spread to not merely the large majority of intellectuals in this final quarter of the century, but to many millions of other people in the West.¹

Nisbet recommended a religious awakening or “even a major religious reformation” to revive the faith and optimism in progress. In 1987, Paul Kennedy published *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* with a different

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approach, but reached to a similar conclusion. He analyzed economic and military changes within European civilization since 1500, and held the view that big powers have always maintained their supremacy in world affairs by keeping a prudent balance between the creation of wealth and military expenditure. The failure to maintain such a balance in modern Europe had caused the fall from supremacy of Spain, The Netherlands, France, and Britain respectively at different times. This has continued till the middle of the twentieth century. He also warned the cold war rivals at the latter half of the twentieth century, the United States and the Soviet Union, of the same fate.

In 1992, Fukuyama published a more controversial book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, defending the nineteenth-century European optimism towards human nature and progress. He expressed his firm belief that the last man, aware of his strengths and weaknesses, and aware of his “perfect rights” and “defective duties,” will subscribe to ideas of liberal democracy. He also expressed his firm confidence in “a liberal democracy that could fight a short and decisive war every generation or so to defend its own liberty and independence would be far healthier and more satisfied than one that experienced nothing but continuous peace.”² Fukuyama’s view of progress of modern European civilization seems directly in conflict with Nisbet’s views.

Within years, Huntington wrote yet another more controversial book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* and argued that there was a clash of civilizations in our contemporary times; and that there was a need for today’s dominating players in world politics to understand the nature of this clash: Huntington made policy recommendations for the United States.

The subject of interest of all four scholars is modern European civilization and its future. The civilization that originated in fifteenth century Europe, and which has since spread to the rest of the world, is currently facing difficulties, and historians and philosophers of history have expressed their strong reservations about its future. The historian E. H. Carr once complained that “the decline of the West has become so familiar a phrase that quotation marks are no longer required.”³ Nisbet and Kennedy seem to agree with the general impression that this civilization needs some remedy for its survival and further progress.

However, while Nisbet, an intellectual historian, identifies the need for a religious reformation to remedy the situation, Kennedy, a military *cum* economic historian, emphasizes the need for economic growth to counter the problem of modern civilization. On the other hand, Fukuyama and

Huntington, both political scientists, seem to have been more interested in maintaining American supremacy in contemporary world affairs.

Although European thought had already witnessed crises during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the debate over the fate of European civilization began after World War I. This debate reached the level of the common people when Spengler, a natural scientist turned historian, published the first volume of his *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (The Decline of the West) in 1918. This was a shocking conclusion about the fate of European civilization. Europeans had a very high expectation about the future of their civilization. This pre-war optimism is reflected in one of Toynbee's profound observations. Toynbee, who was born in 1889, noted that his generation:

expected that life throughout the world would become more rational, more humane, and more democratic and that, slowly, but surely, political democracy would produce greater social justice. We had also expected the progress of science and technology would make mankind richer, and that this increasing wealth would gradually spread from a minority to a majority. We had expected that all this would happen peacefully. In fact we thought that mankind's course was set for an earthly paradise, and that our approach towards this goal was predestined for us by historical necessity.⁴

However, this optimism was shattered by the two World Wars. Toynbee concluded his voluminous *The Study of History*, in which he studied the rise and fall of twenty-one different world civilizations, saying:

If there was any validity in the writer's procedure of drawing comparisons between Hellenic history and western, it would seem to follow that the western society must, at any rate, be not immune from the possibility of a similar fate; and, when the writer, on passing to his wider studies, found that a clear majority of his assemblage of civilizations were already dead, he was bound to infer that death was indeed a possibility confronting every civilization, including his own.⁵

Toynbee's "own civilization" was the European civilization which in various places in his work he identified also as western civilization or western society. As the century progressed toward the end, the debate became increasingly live, as if major changes must occur at the beginning of the new century or the new millennium. The twentieth century had begun with the domination of studies about "the world of nations,"⁶ but gradually turned toward the study of civilizations.⁷ This article proposes joining this debate and addresses some of the questions raised above.

History as Progress

About four decades ago Carr delivered a series of lectures on *What Is History*. The title of one of his lectures in this series was “history as progress.” In the very beginning of his discussion in this essay, Carr became involved in an issue related to historiography: whether history was mysticism or cynicism. This immediately led him to a discussion on the controversial relationship between history and religion. Our main objective in this essay, however, is to determine the nature of progress mankind has made in history, whether this progress has led to happier and more productive lives for mankind, and whether or not progress in history relates to the growth of civilization.

Carr defined the relationship between history and progress by saying, “[h]istory is progress through the transmission of acquired skills from one generation to another.”⁸ However, he also expressed his belief that:

The rationalists of the Enlightenment, who were founders of modern historiography, retained the Jewish-Christian teleological view, but secularized the goal; they were thus enabled to restore the rational character of the historical process itself. History became the progress towards the goal of the perfection of man’s estate on earth.⁹

Carr clearly holds modern historiography as rational, secular and progressive, although he admits that modern historiography retained the Jewish-Christian teleological view.¹⁰ However, one may raise questions about Carr’s view on the foundation of modern historiography as being absolutely rational. Carr holds Gibbon to be the greatest of all Enlightenment historians. He states that:

Gibbon, the greatest of the Enlightenment historians, was not deterred by the nature of his subject from recording what he called ‘the pleasing conclusion that every age of the world has increased, and still increases the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge, and perhaps the virtue, of the human race.’¹¹

Was Gibbon aware of the demands of rational methodology of modern historiography when making this statement? Let us examine the context. Carr quoted Gibbon when the latter was commenting on the fall of the Roman Empire in the West (476), saying that: “We may therefore acquiesce in the pleasing conclusion that ...”¹² Gibbon has been criticized for his optimistic remarks about human progress in this context. However, Carr defended Gibbon in a corresponding footnote, saying that:

A critic in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 18 November 1960, quoting this passage, asks whether Gibbon quite meant it. Of course he did; the point of view of a writer is more likely to reflect the period in which he lives than that about which he writes — a truth well illustrated by the critic, who seeks to transfer his mid-twentieth-century scepticism to a late eighteenth-century writer.¹³

Did Carr do a favor to Gibbon by providing this apology? Was Gibbon's observation time-bound? Hardly. Gibbon himself claimed to have made the observation about the "human race" at "every age of the world." In our understanding, Gibbon's observation actually was about human nature, and about human progress in history and its relations with civilization. It also seems, however, that Gibbon was aware of negative criticism of western European and British attempts at colonization and voyages of "discovery." He expressed an apology for such activities in a footnote following the above-quoted statement, saying:

The merit of discovery has too often been stained with avarice, and fanaticism; and the intercourse of nations has produced the communications of disease and prejudice. A singular exception is due to the virtue of our own times and country. The five great voyages successively undertaken by the command of his present Majesty were inspired by the pure and generous love of science and of mankind. The same prince, adapting his benefactions to the different stages of society, has founded a school of painting in his capital, and has introduced into the islands of the South Sea the vegetables and animals most useful to human life.¹⁴

Why did Gibbon need this apology for colonial voyages of "discovery?" Perhaps he was being haunted by the consciousness of guilt about the behavior of early colonialists who did not hesitate to take any possible step to destroy the indigenous communities. Here also one wonders whether Edward Gibbon was aware of the activities of English East India Company, which had recently colonized parts of India.

After occupying Bengal in 1757, the British East India Company was experiencing problems in organizing its administration. It appointed Warren Hastings as the first Governor General of Bengal in 1774, and he adopted the most cruel and severe methods of collecting money from the people. As a result Hastings was impeached by the British parliament, where Edmund Burke (1729-97), a reknown author and an Irish-born conservative member of parliament, reported about Hasting's method of torture, saying:

Those who could not raise the money were most cruelly tortured: cords were drawn tightly round their fingers, till the flesh of the four on each

hand was actually incorporated, and became solid mass: the fingers were then separated again by wedges of iron and wood driven in between them. Others were tied two and two by feet uppermost; they were then beat on the soles of the feet, till their toenails dropped off.

They were afterwards beat about the head till the blood gushed out at the mouth, nose, and ears; they were also flogged upon the naked body with ... some poisonous weeds, which burnt at every touch. ... a father and son tied naked to one another by the feet and arms, and then flogged till the skin was torn from the flesh ...

The treatment of the females could not be described: dragged from the inmost recesses of their houses, which the religion of the country had made so many sanctuaries, they were exposed naked to public view: the virgins were carried to the Court of Justice, where they might naturally have looked for protection; but now they looked for it in vain; for in the face of the Ministers of Justice, in the face of the spectators, in the face of the sun, those tender and modest virgins were brutally violated. The only difference between their treatment and that of their mothers was, that the former were dishonoured in the face of the day, the latter in the gloomy recesses of their dungeon. Other females had the nipples of their breasts put in a cleft bamboo, and torn off. ... the fathers and husbands of the helpless females were the most harmless and industrious set of men. ... they gave almost the whole produce of their labour to the East India Company: ... produced to all England the comforts of their morning and evening tea: for it was with the rent produced by their industry, that the investments were made for the trade to China, where the tea which we use was bought.¹⁵

Here one wonders how Gibbon, who too was a member of Parliament, could overlook such activities of East India Company officials. The most striking phenomenon is that the House, in view of “his services to the nation,” acquitted Warren Hastings.

Our concerns here are issues of historiography. One should not be surprised to see Carr becoming involved on these issues while discussing history as progress. It is interesting to note that Carr attempted to defend Gibbon’s method and one of Gibbon’s concluding remarks on the nature of progress. And in so doing, Carr himself became victim of the same fault. We shall reconsider the methods of historiography of Gibbon and Carr later in this essay.

As for the question of progress, nobody will dispute the fact that mankind has made tremendous progress in its march in history and one may accept Carr’s view, as quoted earlier, that: “[h]istory is progress through the

transmission of acquired skills from one generation to another.” Progress here would mean human ability to use the nature and environment to his advantage. But has humanity always used its skills for productive and progressive purposes? If they have not been used in productive purposes, what was their impact on civilization?

The question also arises as to whether or not the process of transmission of acquired skills is continuous. In other words, has mankind made continuous progress since the very inception of civilization? We shall hold a negative answer to this question, for had the opposite been the case, nobody would have talked about the rise and fall of civilization. And we have ample evidence in history that many civilizations existed in the past, and we find only their ruins today. A twentieth-century historian of science, George Sarton, in his *Introduction to the History of Science*, observed:

We might be tempted to conclude that if mankind had walked humbly and constantly in their (Greek) footsteps, the progress of civilization would have been considerably accelerated. But if we did this, we should have shown that we did not entirely understand the nature of progress. It is undoubtedly a function of the increase of positive knowledge ... Greek civilization ended in failure, not only because of the lack of intelligence, but because of the lack of character, of morality.¹⁶

This question of character and morality, raised by Sarton, might provide the clue to our key question of the relationship between progress and civilization. However, Sarton also observed that: “[t]hroughout the course of history, in every period, and in almost every country, we find a small number of saints, of great artists, of men of science.”¹⁷ He also asserted that: “[o]ur men of science are not necessarily more intelligent than those of the old [and] [t]he acquisition and systematization of positive knowledge is the only human activity which is truly cumulative and progressive.”¹⁸ Sarton then suggested that: “[t]he progress of our own studies makes us see more and more clearly how much they (ancient scientists) borrowed from earlier peoples, but by way of contrast this enhances our opinion of their originality and fortifies our admiration of their scientific genius.”¹⁹ Therefore, civilizations throughout history have learned from the legacy of earlier civilizations.²⁰ Let us now consider the meaning of progress and civilization in history.

Progress as Civilization

How do civilizations grow in history? Fernand Braudel, in his *A History of Civilizations*, quotes Toynbee, saying:

Arnold Toynbee offered a tempting theory [about the growth of civilization]. All human achievement, he thought, involved challenge and response. Nature had to present itself as a difficulty to be overcome. If human beings took up the challenge, their response would lay the foundations of civilization.²¹

Braudel himself attempted to understand the term civilization by studying the historical use of the term in European languages in the eighteenth century, and concluded that the study of civilization involved all social sciences. He defined the concept in terms of “civilizations as geographical areas,” “civilizations as societies,” and “civilizations as ways of thought.”²² Although Braudel provides a good insight into the term, it provides little understanding about the growth and relationship between progress and civilization, and the mechanisms of rise and fall of civilizations. In our view the Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) provides a simple but profound understanding of the term while keeping the above questions in mind. However, Ibn Khaldun’s explanation of the term requires some understanding about the Arabic language and Islamic civilization. It also involves reinterpretation of some of Ibn Khaldun’s original ideas.²³

Ibn Khaldun used the term *‘umran*, which is derived from the three letter verb *‘a-ma-ra* meaning (according to the dictionary) to live long, to thrive, prosper, flourish, flower, peopled, populated, civilized, cultivated. The word *‘umran* has been translated as inhabitedness, activity, bustling life, thriving, flourishing, prosperity, civilization, building, edifice, and structure. *‘Umran* is a continuous progressive process that mankind naturally achieves through cooperation and striving.²⁴ According to Ibn Khaldun:

Human society is a must. Philosophers express this by saying that man is political by nature; meaning, he cannot do without social life which is civic in nature. To explain ... man cannot survive without food...the capacity of any one individual is inadequate, (there is a need) to grind, knead, and bake food, they also need craftsmen such as blacksmiths, carpenters, and potters. Individuals also need the help of their fellow men for defence ... from aggressive animals, and from aggression of other human beings ... (thus) the society of men is achieved and *‘umran* is spread.²⁵

Thus man establishes *‘umran* in order to satisfy his basic needs. Then man gradually develops and activates his rational mind for better living. Ibn Khaldun says:

Crafts, especially arithmetic and writing, bestow a certain mind on those who practice them ... rational soul exists in man only potentially. Its emergence from potentiality to actuality is depicted by the rise of new sci-

ences and perceptions derived first from the world of senses, then what is acquired afterwards by the speculative power, until it becomes active perception and pure intellect.²⁶

However, the society needs to provide an individual with peaceful and cordial circumstances for him to utilize his rational mind. The society can ensure such circumstances only through close cooperation within the human community. Ibn Khaldun develops another key concept to explain such cooperation. According to Ibn Khaldun:

The defensive and protective action (of mankind) is not effective unless they have a common `asabiyah or fellow feelings of having common descent ... with this they become strong and powerful. The compassion and partisan support toward their relatives and blood relations becomes part of their human nature. It leads to their solidarity and mutual support, and increases the fear of their enemy ... (and when it comes to fighting) it won't do without `asabiyah.²⁷

Ibn Khaldun strongly believed that in history kingdoms and dynasties were attained through `asabiyah. Even the "religious causes can't succeed without `asabiyah."²⁸ Therefore `asabiyah, which originates with the family and tribe, grows in strength and scope with the passage of time. It is a state of mind that has a natural defensive mechanism of survival and accommodates the emotional aspect. It can also be transformed into a tool of conquest and expansion.

In history, whenever the forces of `asabiyah succeeded in establishing the kingdom, the population was provided with peace and security. On their part, the people were happy and were engaged in productive and progressive activities. In other words, with increased security and protection the `umrani (civilizational) attention was diverted to cooperation among people for growth and production. It is `asabiyah that provided people with the capacity for protection, defence, and other collective action. Even those people who do not belong to the ruler's blood group develop a working relationship with the ruling group. The society then moves from production of necessities to production of luxuries. According to Ibn Khaldun:

Should the circumstances of the working people improve, and they acquire more wealth and comfort than necessary, they would turn to a life of ease and tranquillity. They would cooperate then using the surplus over necessities to produce more and better food and clothing. They would build larger houses and make plans for towns and cities to live in. Further increase in their prosperity would lead to the formation

of luxury habits which reach to a high degree of refinement in the preparation of food and cooking, in the selection of fancy clothes of silk and brocade. They construct ever higher buildings, and houses, with elaborate decoration.²⁹

Ibn Khaldun makes a distinction between two types of *`umran*: rural *`umran* is generally the result of production of necessities, while urban *`umran* is the result of production of luxuries. With increased security and freedom, people get involved in competition and activities of economic production and growth, and as a result, *`umran* further increases and flourishes: old cities are rebuilt, and new cities are constructed. Ibn Khaldun also points out that the government increases its finances by tax revenue. For this, the government needs to ensure justice for its population.³⁰ The government can collect taxes only if it can ensure peace and security for its population. However, in urban areas, life became relatively easy. On this, Ibn Khaldun warns the urban population that they may become so immersed in habits of luxury and pleasure-seeking that their souls could become stained with vices and corruption. If this happens, economic activities and growth suffer. Ibn Khaldun says:

(Usually) the government constitutes the biggest market. From this market flows the substance of *`umran*; if the ruler lacks or withholds the funds ... the total spending declines ... mercantile profits dwindle and overall income (of the government) also declines. This is because government's revenues are generated from industrial activities, business transactions, and people's search for benefits and profits. ... This effects the smaller markets and circulation of money in the market.³¹

Ibn Khaldun warns the government against acts of force on the part of the ruler. He says that one man's possession cannot be acquired by another except through proper exchange. Violation of people's property kills their hopes of earning: and with their hopes shattered, they refrain from all striving to that end. In this connection, Ibn Khaldun defines the Islamic concept of *zulm* or injustice and states:

[D]o not think that *zulm* consists only, as it is generally held, of taking away property from its owners without cause or compensation. Whoever seizes someone else's property, or forces work on him, makes unjust claims, or imposes an obligation not required by law, has actually oppressed him. Those who collect unjust taxes are oppressors. Those who plunder property are oppressors. In consequence, the government suffers, because *`umran* is ruined due to loss of people's hopes.³²

Thus, Ibn Khaldun discusses not only the method of the growth of *`umran* but also provides an insight into ways it is ruined. Following this definition of *`umran* or civilization, then, one may argue that the earliest villages, such as Jericho in Palestine and Çatal Höyük in Turkey, which existed around 7500 BCE or before, were civilized societies. Archaeological findings in Çatal Höyük suggest that it was a locality of about 32 acres surrounded by a solid wall, where about 10,000 people lived for several hundred years in sun-dried brick houses. The earliest known textile fragments, as well as containers of wood and clay, have been found in Çatal Höyük.³³ Establishment of such an organized and inhabited area could not have been possible without some form of formal government and a set of laws. In this sense it would be a mistake to identify the river valley civilizations (Mesopotamia, Egypt, Indus Valley, and Hoang Ho River valley that originated between the years 3500 BCE and 2500 BCE) in world history as the earliest civilizations.

However, Ibn Khaldun seems to have ignored the role of ideas in the formation of civilization. Braudel calls this aspect of the growth of civilization the “awareness” or “mentality” of the people which acts as a catalyst in ensuring cooperation among themselves. Without any role of ideas *`asabiyah* becomes too deterministic. Also this concept alone does not explain why some tribes succeeded in utilizing their *`asabiyah* to create their state and government, and others failed. Braudel says: “In every period, a certain view of the world, a collective mentality, dominates the whole mass of the society. Dictating a society’s attitudes, guiding its choices, confirming its prejudices and directing its actions, this is very much a fact of civilization.”³⁴ The reason for Ibn Khaldun to ignore the role of ideas in the formation of civilization is, perhaps, the domination of Islamic civilization in world affairs for many centuries before his birth. He witnessed alterations in politics and world affairs only through dynastic changes.

Can we apply Ibn Khaldun’s ideas of rise and fall of dynasties in understanding the rise and fall of civilizations? Does the concept of *`asabiyah* help us understand the rise of racism and nationalism in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? In our view, Braudel has rightly pointed out that the growth of “liberty groups” during the late medieval period paved the way to the rise of Europe. According to him, “Liberties, in fact, were the franchises or privileges protecting this or that group of people or interests, which used such protection to exploit others, often without shame.”³⁵ Following the growth of city-states,

under the “enlightened despots” nation-states emerged in Europe. `Asabiyah of race, linguistic and cultural divisions, and other material interests motivated people in the formation of nationalities. By the end of the nineteenth century, Europe was already divided on the basis of nationalities.³⁶ This scenario was followed in most other parts of the world after the two world wars in the twentieth century. The world of nations slowly became the principal structural foundation of the modern world system.

Any comparison between modern European civilization and any earlier civilizations raises the question of the common people’s participation in the process of progress in earlier civilizations. The general belief maintained by scholars from the European civilization is that the uniqueness of modern Europe lies in the ideas, such as liberalism and democracy, which ensured cooperation among common people resulting in civilization. However, one’s enthusiasm for Europe must not underestimate the process of the rise of earlier civilizations. Following Ibn Khaldun’s analyses of the formation of `umran, it would be proper to suggest that earlier civilizations could not have arisen in history without the cooperation and participation of their people. A historian of Indian economy writing about the state of India’s economy during the pre-modern period, and comparing it with the British administration stated:

Is it any wonder that the administration (British Imperial) ... should, amidst surrounding Imperial influences, sometimes forget the over-taxed Indian cultivator, the unemployed Indian manufacturer, and the striving Indian laborer?

Such was not the past in India. Hindu and Mahomedan rulers were always absolute kings, often despotic, but never exclusive. Their administration was ... based on the cooperation of the people. The Emperor ruled at Delhi; his Governors ruled provinces; Zemindars ... (covering) the entire population, from the cultivator upwards, had a share in the administration of the country.³⁷

Therefore, one should not be misled with ideas that only in recent history, and with the influence of ideas such as democracy, that the common people have participated in the growth of civilization. Similarly when the ruling elite in earlier civilizations lost the confidence of their people, the civilization gradually declined and fell. This leads to the most critical question of our essay: Is the current world civilization in the state of decline? Let us now consider this question.

Is European Civilization in Decline?

The question “whether or not the current world civilization (or European) is in decline” is not in dispute. We have quoted Carr earlier in this essay complaining that the expression “decline of the West” does not even require quotation marks any more. The question under dispute is the nature and current state of this decline. Also in dispute, in our opinion, is its identity. What is this current world civilization? Should this civilization be called western, European, or American? Or should we name it totally differently? Other than his own, Toynbee identifies the existence of four other living civilizations; namely, an Orthodox Christian society, an Islamic society, a Hindu society, and a Far Eastern society.³⁸ Explaining the current world civilizational situation, Toynbee says:

It is interesting to notice that when we turn back to the cross-section at AD 775 we find that the number and identity of the societies on the world map are nearly the same as at the present time. Subsequently, the world map of societies of this species has remained constant since the first emergence of our Western society. In the struggle for existence, the West has driven its contemporaries to the wall and entangled them in the meshes of its economic and political ascendancy, but it has not yet disarmed them of their distinctive cultures. Hard pressed though they are, they can still call their souls their own.³⁹

But how does one define Toynbee’s own civilization? Is it western? How to identify the West? Is it a geographical entity? A racial identity? Or an identity of an ideological orientation? Braudel warns us about simple generalizaion, saying:

Western civilization, so-called, is at once the “American civilization” of the United States, and the civilization of Latin America, Russia and of course, Europe. Europe itself contains a number of civilizations – Polish, German, Italian, English, French etc. Not to mention the fact these national civilizations are made up of “civilizations” that are smaller still: Scotland, Ireland, Catalonia, Sicily, the Basque country and so on. Nor should we forget that these divisions, these multi-coloured mosaics, embody more or less permanent characteristics.⁴⁰

On the other hand, for Huntington, modern civilization is western civilization and western civilization is modern civilization.⁴¹ Like Toynbee, he believes that this civilization originated from the tradition of western Christendom and from the legacy of the western Roman Empire. However, these two scholars disagree about the general characteristics of this legacy. While Huntington believes that: “[h]istorically western society has been

highly pluralistic,”³² Toynbee identifies the difficulties faced by the civilization in accommodating the Jews within the civilization. Yet a more important question is – whether the geographical areas the historical western Christendom or the western Roman Empire (395–476) could really be held to be the originators of modern civilization.

It is true that the “barbarian” challenges against this empire created a sense of panic among the people of the region and forced them to cooperate, but how credible was this foundation? How are these invasions connected to the period of the Renaissance and colonization in the fifteenth century when the real growth of Western Europe began to take shape? Although the period of the Crusades (1095-1270) forms a sort of connection between the two, how concrete is this connection? For the Crusades were not defensive in nature, and offensive wars do not usually result in the same level of cooperation necessary for the foundation of civilizations.

Also in question is the composition of this civilization: what geographical territories did western Christendom constitute? Didn’t the so-called barbarian tribes gradually become part of this civilization? And as Braudel has pointed out: “The Eastern frontier [of the Empire] ... was pushed Eastwards with the birth of Christian states in Poland, Hungary and Bohemia.”³⁴ It is, therefore, difficult to identify any original geographical entity of what is called western civilization today.

Is it an ideological identity? If it is an ideological entity, what ideas form the foundation of this civilization? Christianity? How can an eastern religion be the foundation of a civilization that identifies itself as the western civilization? Did Saint Paul and the Roman Emperor Constantine “convert” eastern Christianity to western? How does western Christianity differ from eastern Christianity? The Renaissance or the Reformation? But these developments occurred much later in the area. In fact, because of striking similarities, Toynbee calls his “own” western civilization and Orthodox Christian civilization twin civilizations.

In our opinion, and we shall argue below, it is difficult to distinguish a separate identity of Toynbee’s western civilization till the fifteenth century, although a theological division between the two occurred in 1054. This division had little impact on the material growth of either of the two civilizations. Then one may ask about the status of Greece? Where does it belong? Did it belong to western Christendom? No. Yet most scholars of modern “western” civilization proudly identify this civilization with the legacy of ancient Greek civilization. On the other hand, even though Russia in 1917 adopted the Western European idea of Marxism, it was still called the East.

A more realistic foundation of this civilization may be found in fifteenth-century Europe.

As has been indicated by Ibn Khaldun, civilizations demand continuous and progressive development from the time of their inception. And there has not been any significant progressive growth of modern European civilization since the eighth century, a date identified by Toynbee as the beginning of what he called western civilization. In fact, this civilization hardly made any significant material progress until the fifteenth century. Can the period between the eighth and fifteenth centuries be considered an emotional basis of this civilization? No. For civilizations do not require references to the “glorious past” as does the idea of nationalism. The idea of the glorious past of the Roman civilization could inspire the Italian nationalists alone in their unification movement, but not the European or the “western civilization.” Civilizations require ideas for their foundations, but they also demand continuous material progress from their very inception.

It has been noted earlier that the growth of towns in medieval Europe paved the way to the rise of modern European civilization because “[c]omplete liberty could be achieved only through material prosperity sufficient to enable certain specially favoured towns not merely to guarantee their economic survival but also to provide for their external defence.”⁴⁵ Toynbee believes that England, Switzerland, and Holland had already developed the state of national existence during this growth period of towns and cities.

By the fifteenth century, other national kingdoms began to emerge: Catholic Spain and Portugal emerged struggling against dying Muslim powers in the Iberian Peninsula. Following the Muslim defeat in the late fifteenth century, both countries continued with their aggressive campaign and in the process “discovered” the new continent of America and a new sea route to India. In 1494, Spain and Portugal agreed, with the approval of the Pope, to divide their spheres of colonial activities and thus established the foundation of intra-European coordination on extra-European affairs. In 1536 the Ottomans granted concessions (*imtiyazat*, known as capitulation in Europe) to the French to conduct trade in their territories in their attempt to assist the rise of a west European power against the Hapsburgs. This encouraged England to seek such trade concessions from Muslim powers in Asia.

“Colonial and trading activities” proved to be extraordinarily profitable to Spain and Portugal. While from their Asian trade they made almost five hundred percent profit, they “imported” huge amounts of precious metals

from the Americas. It has been correctly pointed out that “the conquest of America begins, and explains, the rise of Europe.”⁴⁶ According to J. M. Blant:

The flow of precious metals began immediately after the discovery of America, and by 1640 at least 180 tons of gold and 17,000 tons of silver are known to have reached Europe (E. J. Hamilton, 1934; Brading and Cross, 1972; Channu and Channu, 1956) — the real figure must be double or triple these amounts, since records were poor for some areas and periods, and since contraband was immensely important.⁴⁷

The rise of Europe could hardly be conceived without this material support. In the eighteenth century, material support to European growth came from the colonization of India. A historian of Indian economy noted that:

[a]s early as 1769, the directors [of the British East India Company] wished the manufacture of raw silk fabrics discouraged. And they also directed that silk-winders should be made to work in the Company’s factories, and prohibited from working outside “under severe penalties, by the authority of the Government.” This mandate had its desired effect. The manufacture of silk and cotton goods declined in India, and the people who had exported these goods to the markets of Europe and Asia in previous centuries began to import them in increasing quantities.⁴⁸

Yet it took some time for the East India Company to completely implement its policies in India. The same historian further observed that in 1816-17: “India not only clothed the whole of that vast population, but exported 1,659,438.00 pounds worth of goods.”⁴⁹ However, “[t]hirty years later the whole of this export had disappeared, and India imported four million sterling of cotton goods.”⁵⁰ These changes were achieved with the official support of the colonizers. The acquittal of Warren Hastings indicates this.

This is not to suggest that colonial exploitation was the only source responsible for the rise of European civilization: contributions of the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, and the Enlightenment played an equally important role in the rise of this civilization. This is to emphasize the fact that the rationalism of western European Renaissance and Enlightenment were supported by colonial injustices in laying the foundation of European civilization. The phenomenon of colonialism also distinguishes European civilization from American civilization.

Although the earliest colonizers in America treated the original population of the continent most brutally, the early immigrants were different in their approach toward the local population. For many of the earliest immigrants migrated there in order to take refuge from religious persecutions in

Europe. Many of them opposed the adoption of European values in America. One poet wrote in 1786:

Can we never be thought to have learning or grace
Unless it be brought from that horrible place
Where tyranny reigns with her impudent face?⁵¹

Another author, Erasmus Root, made a passionate appeal against adopting European values in the preface of his *Introduction to Arithmetic*, saying:

Let us, I beg you, Fellow-citizens, no longer meanly follow the British intricate mode of reckoning. Let them have their way, and us, ours. ... Their mode is suited to the genius of their government, for it seems to be the polity of tyrants, to keep their accounts in as intricate and perplexing a method as possible; that the smaller number of their subjects may be able to estimate their enormous impositions and exactions. But republican money ought to be simple and adapted to the meanest capacity.⁵²

Although European scholars and statesmen such as de Tocqueville appreciated American democracy, Americans themselves preferred to be isolated from European and world affairs. However, this changed after the two world wars in the twentieth century, when the United States replaced the former European colonizers as world power.

What difference did this isolationism make in the formation of American civilization? In other words, are there any differences between the European and American civilizations? Or they are just parts of what is known as modern or western civilization? In our opinion there are fundamental differences between the two. Although the American civilization has adopted many ideas from the European Enlightenment tradition, unlike European countries, America has made material progress on the basis of its own resources. And because of this fundamental difference between the two civilizations, America has formally adopted a policy of reconciliation toward the original "Indian" population of America. Therefore, one should not identify American civilization as an integral part and continuation of European civilization.

Does this mean that American civilization has no relation with European civilization? Does this also mean that American civilization does not face the crisis that Europe faces? Certainly not. The social and intellectual diseases that cripple Europe have also affected American civilization. Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) reflects this. Is there a cure for this disease? We would like to address this issue now.

Is the Current Civilizational Crisis Curable?

A negative answer to this question will be too deterministic and fatalistic. Although, based on historical experience, celebrated historians such as Toynbee reached the conclusion that death was inevitable to all civilizations, such conclusions will reflect the failure of mankind. This will reflect only the inability of mankind to take care of its own affairs. And this will go against the fundamental spirit of the Renaissance and Enlightenment tradition. What is the solution, then?

Can one accept the view of Fukuyama: “[t]hat a society of last men composed entirely of desire and reason would give way to one of bestial first men seeking recognition alone, and vice versa, in an unending oscillation.”⁵³ This reminds us of the unknown British author who wrote at the end of the nineteenth century, in response to Nordau’s *Degeneration* that:

a sound-minded and morally healthy man needs no compulsion to respect the rights and liberties of others. He trusts and respects himself. He would assist no man in his attempts and intrigues to injure others. He would, therefore, uphold his own, as well as the liberty of others.⁵⁴

Our experience in the twentieth century hardly allows us to be so optimistic about human behavior.

In the beginning of this essay we noted the recommendation of Robert Nisbet for having some kind of religious reform to save modern civilization. But will it be easy to introduce any idea for social and political reform in the name of religion? Is society ready to accept ideas of religious reform? If not religious, how about other ideas? After analyzing the literature on ideas about decline in recent history, one author has recently suggested that: “our real problem is not that our popular culture is filled with obscenities or trivialities, but that no one seems able to present the necessary intellectual grounds for an alternative.”⁵⁵ The author blames the nineteenth-century social sciences for hosting “deterministic assumptions” for understanding history.⁵⁶ How about returning to pre-nineteenth century thought for an alternative intellectual ground.

Of course, the Enlightenment has contributed many ideas that have become cornerstones of European civilization. But one must look at this tradition for any remedial ideas for today’s crises using its own methodology. In other words, one must reevaluate Enlightenment ideas with proper criticism. In this context, one may recall Carr’s apology for Gibbon: “the greatest of the Enlightenment historians.” In the same essay, Carr suggested that:

The rationalists of the Enlightenment, who were founders of modern historiography, retained the Jewish–Christian teleological views, but secularized the goal; they were thus enabled to restore the rational character of the historical process itself. History became progress towards the goal of the perfection of man’s estate on earth.⁵⁷

Has Europe been able to achieve this perfection of man since the period of the Enlightenment? Have the Europeans been able to draw a line of compromise between the teleological view of Jewish–Christian tradition and the secular idea of progress? Wasn’t the secular hope in the idea of progress in the nineteenth century, as recollected by Toynbee of his generation, dashed by the world wars and the intellectual and moral depressions of the twentieth century? Isn’t it a fact that these developments prevented Toynbee from being optimistic about the future of his “own civilization”?

If we turn to Ibn Khaldun for a possible solution to this problem, we find him emphasizing the concept of *zulm* or injustice as the main cause of the decline of civilizations. May we then consider whether the current world civilization under the leadership of the United States is behaving on just principles? Such a consideration will be proper because the concept of justice is common to the Enlightenment, ancient Greek philosophy and to all religious traditions. We have noted Sarton’s suggestions on the issue earlier in this essay. However, such a subject demands a complete separate discussion.

One can only note with concern some dangerous observations and recommendations by some scholars. Huntington, for example, observed that the Clinton administration “failed to involve Russia wholeheartedly in the search for peace in Bosnia,” and “denied self-determination to the Serbian and Croatian minorities (in Bosnia).”⁵⁸ He also recommended that “to preserve western civilization in the face of declining western power, it is in the interest of the United States . . . to accept Russia . . . with legitimate interests in the security of its southern borders.”⁵⁹

Any observer of international politics knows well about the time and energy spent on attempts at getting Russia involved in the Balkans, and in the process how many innocent people became victims of aggression because of delayed international action. Should the United States support Russia in “securing” its southern borders at the expense of the right to self-determination of the people in the region? Would not such support push the freedom-loving people in the region toward terrorism?

What is needed, perhaps, is a thorough evaluation of the Enlightenment tradition. Since this tradition originated in Europe when it was also engaged

in colonial expansion, an evaluation of Enlightenment ideas will be necessary in order to examine whether some of these ideas were formulated to justify colonialism. This evaluation must be based on universal human values of justice and liberty. In fact such an evaluation would fall within the fundamental principles of this tradition. If these values were manipulated to serve the interests of European powers, they must be corrected in this age of globalization in the twenty-first century.

One must examine whether there are European aspects of Enlightenment values; if there are, they must be transformed into universal global values. Such attempts might be able to integrate philosophical and scientific achievements with moral and human principles. The United States as leader of the current global order has already taken the initiative by recognizing the injustices committed to the native Americans and Afro-Americans. This must be extended to incorporate the whole humanity in the global village of the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 317.
2. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 329.
3. See E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* 2d ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 112. This civilization was known as European civilization till the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, with the participation of the United States in the world wars, and following the wars in the peace conferences, it has come to be known as western civilization. In our opinion this expression may not be proper, and we shall discuss this issue later in this essay.
4. Arnold Toynbee, *Surviving the Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 106-7.
5. Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Abridgement by D.C. Sommervell (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 912.
6. See for example, Dankwart A. Rustow, *A World of Nations: Problems of Political Modernization* (Washington: The Brookings Institutions, 1967), and hundreds of other books dealing with the idea of nationalism published around the middle of the twentieth century.
7. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). The first part of the book discusses 'a world of civilizations.'
8. Carr, *What Is History?*, 114.
9. *Ibid.*, 110-11.

10. It will be impossible to totally ignore the influence of religious views on matters related to historiography.
11. Carr, *What Is History?*, 111.
12. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 7 vols. 7th ed. Ed. J. B. Bury (London: Methuen & Co.) 4:169.
13. Carr, *What Is History?*, 111.
14. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 4:169.
15. See James Mill, *The History of British India*, 3 vols. (London, 1917, reprinted in New Delhi: Associated Press, 1990), 3:66-67.
16. George Sarton, *Introduction to the History of Science*, 3 vols. (Baltimore: The Williams and Wilkins Company for the Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1927), 1:9-10.
17. Sarton, *Introduction*, 1:3.
18. *Ibid.*, 1:4.
19. *Ibid.*, 1:8-9.
20. Here one must note the historiographical error of many historians in who trace the foundation of modern European civilization in the Greco-Roman tradition alone, and ignore the fact that early Greeks acquired a great deal of knowledge from the Egyptians and Mesopotamians.
21. Fernand Braudel, *A History of Civilization*, Richard Mayne. tr. (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 11.
22. *Ibid.*, 3-23.
23. Ibn Khaldun's ideas are extensive and complex; they demand separate treatment. However, attempts will be made here to simplify some of his ideas.
24. See Abdurrahman Muhammad bin Khaldun, *Muqaddimah Ibn Khaldun*, 3 vols. 2nd ed. (Beirut: Lajnat al-Lubnan al-`Arabi: 1965). *Al-Muqaddimah* (The Introduction) has been translated and used by many authors. The complete and most acceptable one is *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction*. Franz Rosenthal, tr. 3 vols. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958). We shall use Rosenthal's translation with some changes wherever necessary.
25. Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah*, 1:89-92.
26. *Ibid.*, 1:406.
27. *Ibid.*, 1:263.
28. *Ibid.*, 1:322.
29. *Ibid.*, 1:249-50.
30. *Ibid.*, 2:95-96.
31. *Ibid.*, 3:102-3.
32. *Ibid.*, 3:106-7.
33. For a good description of archaeological excavations of Çatal Höyük, see *Skylife* (Official magazine of the Turkish Airlines), (Year 15, No. 67), 36-42. Although this is not a scholarly source of information, pictures provided in the magazine are revealing.
34. Braudel, *History of Civilization*, 22.

35. Ibid., 316.
36. Although foundations of these nationalities were claimed to be scientific, they were never final. A number of new nations have emerged in Europe even in the 1990s, and a number of other “nationalities” are struggling to achieve the status of nationality.
37. Romesh C. Dutt, *The Economic History of India: Under Early British Rule*, 2 vols. (London: Kegan Paul, 1906). Reprinted (Delhi: Publication Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1960), 2:450. In fact, one will find a direct relationship between the British Industrial Revolution and the decline of Indian industries.
38. Here one must keep in mind that Toynbee uses civilization and society interchangeably denoting the same meaning.
39. Toynbee, 8-9.
40. Braudel, *History of Civilization*, 12.
41. Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*, 69. However, Huntington too has expressed his reservations about the identity of “Western” civilization. See 47.
42. Ibid., 70.
43. Toynbee, 729-737. One must keep in mind that assimilation of the Jewish people into this civilization has been most successful.
44. Braudel, *History of Civilization*, 308-9.
45. Ibid., 320.
46. J. M. Blant, *1492: The Debate on Colonialism, Eurocentricism, and History* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992), 1-2.
47. Ibid., 39.
48. Dutt, *Economic History of India*, 1:256.
49. Ibid., 2:90.
50. Ibid.
51. Frederick L. Pattee, ed., *The Poems of Philip Freneau*, 3 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Library, 1902), 2:304. Quoted in Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1943), 148.
52. Quoted in Curti, *American Thought*, 138-39.
53. Fukuyama, *End of History*, 335.
54. *Regeneration: A Reply to Max Nordau* (Westminister: Archibald Constable, 1895), 304.
55. Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 450-51.
56. Ibid., 448.
57. Carr, *What Is History?*, 110-11.
58. Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*, 309.
59. Ibid., 311-12.