

## **Western Civilisation**

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The question regarding the nature of Western civilisation is not an easy one to answer, not least because of the way in which those of us who are the products of Western civilisation think about such things. Three preliminary points are worth making:

- The word civilisation was created during the Enlightenment. Its first usage in English is in Adam Ferguson's *History of Civil Society* (1767) but it was not used in the plural until quite a number of years later. It is worth noting that Guizot, writing in the 1820s called his lectures and book *Histoire de la civilisation en Europe* not *Histoire de la civilisation européenne*.<sup>1</sup> Western civilisation does not really appear on the scene until the twentieth century and is largely an American creation.
- The word civilisation is not the only word used in the 'West' to describe a complex social order. Before there was civilisation there was the word police from which the modern term policy is derived. Many figures of the late eighteenth century used this term including Ferguson and Adam Smith. Police has a largely political connotation, while civilisation is a response to the rise of commercial society. Culture emerged in the nineteenth century, in part as a response to what was seen as the overtly materialist and commercial nature of civilisation in countries such as England.<sup>2</sup> In particular, Germans favoured *Kultur* as possessing a spiritual dimension in opposition to what was seen as the shallow and materialist nature of civilisation.
- One can be a civilised person without living in a civilisation. Being civilised can be seen as behaving in a particular way, generally marked by moderation and decency.

The fact that both the terms 'civilisation' and 'Western civilisation' have quite complex histories may, as shall be argued, be the consequence of the type of civilisation which has evolved in the West. It also means that the term 'western civilisation' does not have a single fixed meaning but can be used in a number of different ways. We all use these terms in ways that differ a little or a lot. Nevertheless, I'll chance my hand in this matter.

A civilisation can be understood as the cultural expression of what is best described as a commonwealth which is to say those elements of a social and cultural order which are not concerned with the political and the coercive.<sup>3</sup> This is consistent with the original Enlightenment use of the word in which commerce and the free exchange of goods, ideas and people were emphasised. It is a network, or a series of networks, of people sharing common values and outlooks on the world rather than something imposed by political

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<sup>1</sup> See (in English translation) Francois Guizot, *The History of Civilization in Europe*, Trans. William Hazlett, Penguin, London, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> See Gregory Melleuish, 'Civilisation, Culture and Police, *Arts*, 1998, 20 : 7–25.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the idea of commonwealth see 'The West, the Anglo-sphere and the ideal of commonwealth,' *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 55, (2), 1998: 233-247

leaders.<sup>4</sup> These networks transcend political boundaries; examples would include Christendom of the Middle Ages in Europe and the Ummah in the Islamic world.

In this sense a civilisation is something quite different from the modern nation state which attempts to unite political power with culture, especially through its control of the education of the young. As the modern state, and this is a consequence of what is best understood as the 'cultural patterning' of Western Civilisation, is based on the idea that law is something which pertains to the geographical area under its control rather than to a people, then it seeks to ensure that everyone living in that area shares a common culture. The problem with Samuel Huntington's idea of civilisation in his famous book on the clash of civilisations is that it assumed that civilisation was akin to the culture of a nation state.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, it can be argued that a civilisation is marked off from another civilisation by the cultural patterning which occurs within it. The term cultural patterning comes from the Islamicist Marshall Hodgson who was seeking ways of differentiating Western and Islamic civilisation.<sup>6</sup> Cultural patterning can be best understood as the distinct patterns, in terms of beliefs, customs and practices which emerge amongst a people over time. It is not something which happens consciously but is the consequence of roads taken, decisions made and circumstance.

One might here think in terms of language. Human language changes and evolves differently in different places. This happens because human beings have plastic natures and changes in language and culture occur as a consequence. To give one example; Latin like every Indo-European language was inflected which is to say case was determined by word ending and consequently word order in a sentence did not matter for meaning. The Romance languages, and English, are no longer inflected but rely on word order to convey meaning. This development was not a conscious act, unlike American spelling of English, but it made these languages highly unusual amongst those of the Indo-European family which includes Iranian and northern Indian languages.

Similar processes are at work in a whole range of what can be loosely called cultural practices. Cultures, and the civilisations of which they are part, evolve and change because they come to flow in particular ways. Civilisations cannot aspire to universality, although they can come to be marked out by contradictory tendencies.

Civilisations are not hermits. They encounter other civilisations through war and trade and the interchange of ideas and the members of a civilisation must decide what to make of the ways and beliefs of those other civilisations. A famous example comes from the history of

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<sup>4</sup> On networks see Niall Ferguson, *The Square and the Tower*, Penguin, London, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Marshall Hodgson, 'Cultural Patterning in Islamdom and the Occident,' in his *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*, Edmund Burke III Ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, 126—170.

Rome. It appears that the Romans took very little culturally from the Carthaginians but they were culturally 'conquered' by the Greeks whom they had conquered militarily.

If one is looking for the birthplace of Western civilisation, as well as Europe, the best location is the Carolingian Empire under Charlemagne. This included what is now France, western Germany, the low countries, northern Italy. Although politically separate, one would also include England as Alcuin made such a singular contribution to the Carolingian Renaissance.<sup>7</sup> What can be seen is a social and political order derived from both Germanic and Roman origins seeking to claim the inheritance of Roman civilisation, in particular the Latin inheritance both in religious and secular terms. This can perhaps be best illustrated by Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* which is modelled on Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* (without the salacious bits).

The 'West' consciously looked back to Rome. It sought to improve the Latin script. In particular, it claimed the inheritance of the great theologian of late antiquity, St Augustine. The literate networks of the West came to have a Latin imprint even as the social order developed in ways which owed more to the Germanic origins of those who had conquered the Western Roman Empire centuries before.<sup>8</sup> This desire to re-imagine oneself as a Roman was still in play a millennium later amongst the men who made the French Revolution. The so-called Holy Roman Empire in Germany only came to an end in 1807.

I do not intend to provide a potted history of the civilisation of the West as it developed over the next one thousand years but to explore two themes which have come to mark out Western civilisation and the shape it has taken. One is the question of cultural patterning and the other is the way in which the members of the civilisation have absorbed ideas, values and practices from other civilisations. If my argument regarding the birth of the West with Charlemagne, and Western civilisation with the Carolingian Renaissance, is correct, then that birth was marked by a desire to recreate a civilisation which was both largely dead and in many ways alien to the culture of those seeking to recreate it. Latin was not a living language for the British and Irish who helped to preserve it. As shall be argued this capacity to assimilate values from outside of itself may well be, as Rémi Brague has argued, the defining quality of Western civilisation.<sup>9</sup>

Cultural patterning may not happen at a highly conscious level even as it appropriates ideas which have intellectual sources and which may issue in sophisticated intellectual discussions. There are two quite important aspects of Western civilisation which tend not

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<sup>7</sup> On Renaissances in both Byzantium and the West see 'Renaissance' in Anthony Grafton et al *The Classical Tradition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass., 807—815

<sup>8</sup> On the Germanic aspect of Western civilisation see David Gress, *From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West and Its Opponents*, Free Press, New York, 1998, 169—208.

<sup>9</sup> Rémi Brague, *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization*, Trans. Samuel Lester, St Augustine's Press, South Bend, Indiana.

to be discussed very much and these are corporatism and nominalism which I would argue have been highly significant in shaping the West.

In this context it might be best to preface such a discussion with a few comments on what is commonly called Western exceptionalism. What has often exercised the minds of those considering Western civilisation is the issue of why the West, meaning largely Europe and North America, became so powerful in terms of politics, economics and military power. There have been many attempts to provide the key which will unlock the secret to Western power.<sup>10</sup> Of course, such a project cannot be conclusive, as it is impossible to conduct empirical experiments to isolate what factors determine the matter.

A whole range of explanations have been given to explain the extraordinary power which various states who were part of the West developed, in particular from about 1800. These have included individualism, capitalism, scientific thinking, capacity for technological innovation. The reality of Western power cannot be denied but, in many ways, it is a separate issue from that of understanding the nature of Western civilisation. There are those, even today, who wish to discern the secret of Western power but it is well to remember that there is much more to Western civilisation than the capacity of Western states to become rich and powerful.

Put another way, there may be aspects of Western civilisation which have contributed to the capacity of states of Western origin to become powerful but that is not the primary reason for studying Western civilisation. As commonwealths, civilisations are concerned primarily with matters associated with the way in which we live, and should live, our lives and the ways in which we express ourselves regarding such matters. I have argued elsewhere that one should regard the piano as one of the greatest creations of Western civilisation.<sup>11</sup>

Corporatism is part of the way in which people in the West live their lives as members of states, local communities and of companies which employ many of them.<sup>12</sup> Without it, there would be no modern state and no modern democracy and it would be much more difficult to conduct commercial enterprise. It is corporatism which allows bodies of people to be identified, for legal purposes, as an individual and treated as such. This includes the state. One implication of corporatism is that office holders are separate to the offices they hold such that authority is vested in the office not the person.

Such a view of organisations and power is in no sense 'natural' but an artifice which is an outcome of cultural patterning. Most forms of human political organisation since the

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<sup>10</sup> Two recent examples of many are Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, Allen Lane, London, 2011 and Philip T Hoffman, *Why did Europe Conquer the World?*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2015

<sup>11</sup> Greg Melleuish, *Is the West Special? World History and Western Civilisation*, Institute of Public Affairs, Melbourne, 2012, 23

<sup>12</sup> The classic studies on corporatism in English are by F W Maitland. See F W Maitland, *State, Trust and Corporation*, David Runciman & Magnus Ryan Eds. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003

development of agriculture have been either chiefdoms or modified chiefdoms in which loyalty has been founded on kinship or personal allegiance. Empires, including Persia, China and ancient Rome, were ruled by men who could claim either to be gods or have a special relationship with the divine.

Hodgson makes the point that Islamic society is based on such personal contractual relationships and that it is intensely egalitarian as all Muslim males are considered to be equal.<sup>13</sup> Authority in early medieval Europe was also based on personal relationships in the shape of lordship and the result in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was a rather violent and anarchic society.<sup>14</sup> Two factors changed this situation. One was the Church, and in particular the reforms instituted by Gregory VII which turned it into a much more legalistic institution, a model for the secular state.<sup>15</sup> The other was the revival of Roman Law in twelfth century Italy. With the development of towns and cities in medieval Europe these came to be defined by legal documents which were the forerunners of the modern constitution. In fact, late medieval Europe was riddled with all sorts of corporate bodies, from guilds to religious fraternities to various political and legislative bodies such as the English parliament. Western individualism developed within a Christian and corporate framework which means that it was always constrained by a realisation that individuals had responsibilities and obligations to others.

There was a massive assault on medieval European constitutionalism from the sixteenth century onwards as monarchs asserted their power using their so-called Divine Right as a justification. Monarchs claimed a 'prerogative' to make laws in their own name; in many ways this was an attempt to revert to a sort of chiefdom. But the constitutional principle, which is the consequence of Western corporatism, ultimately triumphed, thereby creating modern popular government and democracy. It is worth noting that the Fuhrer principle of Nazism was the last attempt to destroy constitutionalism as it sought to equate law with the will of the Fuhrer.

One consequence of understanding social and political life in corporate terms in the West has been the development of a legally based bureaucracy based on office holders who create documents which are kept and ultimately archived. Hence Molly Greene contrasts the Venetian administration of Crete in the seventeenth century with the Ottoman one which succeeded it. The Venetian administration was marked by a wealth of documents while the Ottomans, who did much of their business orally, kept few documents, mainly court records.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Hodgson, 'Cultural Patterning in Islamdom and the Occident,'

<sup>14</sup> Thomas N Bisson, *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century: Power, Lordship, and the Origins of European Government*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Harold J Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass., 1983, 85—119.

<sup>16</sup> Molly Greene, *A Shared World: Christians and Muslims in the Early Modern Mediterranean*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000,

Nominalism is the notion that the words which we use to describe phenomena are not natural or divinely prescribed but simply conventional. Word and thing are not connected except in the human mind. To the modern mind this would seem to be common sense but this was not the case in the past. For example, Plato's theory of Ideas would seem to establish a real relationship between a thing and the idea of it.

In many civilisations there is also the idea that a particular language is that used by God or the Gods and consequently defines the nature of the world and how one should behave in the world. The Quran is only the Quran when it is in Arabic. Jews believe that God spoke in Hebrew. In India, Sanskrit was understood to be the language of the Gods and eventually came to be the primary language of literary expression for a millennium.<sup>17</sup> It is interesting that the early Buddhist scriptures were written in Pali which represented a form of nominalist challenge to Brahminism, because it meant that the use of language was based on convention.<sup>18</sup> Chinese poets understood themselves as engaged in a sacred act when using calligraphy to create a poem.<sup>19</sup>

One of the most interesting aspects of Western civilisation is that it has generally not understood its law or its languages as having some sort of sacred power. This is owing primarily, I believe, to Christianity. The New Testament is, perhaps puzzlingly, written in Greek not Hebrew or even Aramaic, the language of Jesus. Jesus proclaims that he has come to fulfil the law and the early Christians expected the imminent end of days.

Hence Christianity is not a religion based on legal observance, as are both Judaism and Islam. What law then do Christians follow? Ramsay McMullan argues that originally Christianity, perhaps unlike Judaism, had no culture and needed to create one once it had become apparent that Jesus would not be returning in the immediate future.<sup>20</sup> Christians in the West could not follow Jewish law; this meant that their law came from non-religious sources, including the law of the Germanic invaders, as in the case of English common law, or Roman Law.

Law was not sacred and neither was language. This explains the enormous effort of Christians to translate the Gospel into every available language. It is the message of the Gospel which matters not the actual words in which it is expressed. Now it is true that there was a time when the medieval Latin Church treated the Vulgate as if it was a sacred text in terms of its Latin expression. But it is clear that such an idea could not last, as Latin was not

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<sup>17</sup> Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture and Power in Premodern India*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, 51—55.

<sup>19</sup> François Cheng, *Chinese Poetic Writing*, Trans. Donald A Riggs and Jerome P Seaton, The Chinese University Press, Hong Kong, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*, Yale University Press. New Haven, 1997, 150



even the original language of the Bible. Erasmus dreamed of making the New Testament available for everyone to read in the original Greek.

It was no accident that the Reformation of the sixteenth century was accompanied by vernacularisation so that people came to read the Bible in their own language. Latin declined over the next two centuries as a serious means of intellectual and artistic expression. The West turned into a civilisation where many languages flourished, although first French and then English gained a position of first amongst equals. Under these circumstances the notion of a necessary connection between word and idea is not sustainable.

Our exploration of the word 'civilisation' demonstrates the nominalist nature of Western thought. Created in France, the word moves into English and then German and other European languages. It is not the only word created to describe the phenomena which it seeks to encompass. It changes its meaning over time. Even more importantly, when it is used it is often not clear what exactly it means.

Words come and words go. One consequence of this understanding of the meaning of words as being conventional is that it means that the world cannot be understood in terms of a static unchanging language. Instead the world becomes inherently historical in nature. Western civilisation is a civilisation which apprehends itself as in historical terms. This means, amongst other things, the idea that the past is qualitatively different from the present and that the future will similarly differ from the present. The historicity of the world would appear to be largely a nineteenth century invention and can be found famously in Walter Scott's *Waverly* and chapter three of T B Macaulay's *History of England*. It is an outgrowth of the stadial theory of history developed by Scottish thinkers such as Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson.<sup>21</sup>

The consequences of understanding the world in nominalist and historical terms are considerable. Amongst other things, it militates against seeing the world as a static entity defined in terms of fixed ideas and rooted in Being. As with Heraclitus, the West has come to an appreciation that the world is in a constant state of becoming in which things change rather than remaining the same. The idea of 'progress' can perhaps be best understood as a way of taming that change and making sense of it from within an historical framework.<sup>22</sup>

I think that it can be argued that related to the nominalist and historical nature of Western civilisation has been its willingness to absorb ideas and practices from other civilisations and to adapt them for its own purposes. Both the Greek and Roman worlds had been very happy to absorb things from other civilisations. The Greeks underwent what is described as

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<sup>21</sup> On the creation of a historical sense See S. Bann, *The Clothing of Clio: A study of the representation of history in nineteenth-century Britain and France*, Cambridge, 1984.

<sup>22</sup> Greg Melleuish & Susanna Rizzo, 'Philosophy of History: Change, Stability and the Tragic Human Condition', *Cosmos and History*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2017.

the 'Orientalising Revolution'.<sup>23</sup> It has been argued that Indian ideas even penetrated Greece, including early Buddhist thought which became the basis of Pyhrronism<sup>24</sup>. Rome, aware of its inferiority, absorbed a lot of Greek culture, including most of its literary forms. Medieval Europe very much looked back to Rome for its inspiration and its form of Christianity was Latin Christianity.

Intellectually, early medieval Europe lacked the vigour and vitality of what was happening in the Islamic world, although it was probably the case that that vigour owed a lot to ideas which came from the late antique Roman Empire and the Buddhist areas conquered by the Muslims. There was what has been described as a Central Asian Enlightenment in the second half of the first millennium of the Common Era.<sup>25</sup>

The fact is that however hostile Christendom may have been to Islam it was not hostile to many of the ideas which came to Europe either from the Islamic world or via it. An example of the latter would be Arabic numbers and zero which had their origins in India. Another example is the recursive argument method which originated in central Asia but became a central element of European scholasticism. It was adapted by Western scholars to become, as Christopher Beckwith argues, the basis of medieval Western science.<sup>26</sup>

Rémi Brague has argued that the West is defined by its capacity to absorb ideas from other civilisations because it has no essence in the way other civilisations do. Beginning as it does, in the barbarian West, it has constantly taken ideas from other civilisations ranging from Greece, to Rome to ancient Israel to Islam, central Asia, India and China. It has been like a sponge soaking up what has come from elsewhere.

There is much truth in this and it also true that the West has sometimes claimed credit for inventing things which clearly it did not. It is difficult to argue cause and effect but one can argue that the capacity for the West to absorb new ideas has an elective affinity with its cultural patterning. The West has been open to new ideas and practices in a way that civilisations which have a more fixed idea of what and who they are do not. I should like to consider the example of printing. The West took to the printing of books from the late fifteenth century which allowed for the diffusion of ideas. In contrast, in the Islamic Ottoman Empire, books were published in Greek, Armenian, Hebrew but there was considerable religious opposition to printing books in Arabic. The diffusion of printed

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<sup>23</sup> Walter Burket, *The Orientalizing Revolution*, Margaret E Pinder Trans., Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass., 1998.

<sup>24</sup> Christopher I Beckwith, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in central Asia*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> S Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher I Beckwith, *Warriors of the Cloisters: The Central Asian Origins of Science in the Medieval World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2012.



Islamic ideas had to wait until the nineteenth century. Equally when a telescope was installed in Istanbul it was destroyed in a popular riot.<sup>27</sup>

Another example is in terms of curiosity. In India, the English displayed a genuine curiosity in traditional Indian texts and translated them into English. When an English embassy visited China in the 1790s the Chinese emperor had no interest in most of the new inventions which the embassy brought with them.<sup>28</sup>

It could be the case that for a long time the West had an inbuilt inferiority complex but, as Brague argues, it means that the West has always been a work in progress which fits its nominalist and historical qualities.

This essay has attempted to provide one way of considering the nature of Western civilisation. It is an interpretation, which, as are all interpretations, is open to challenge. Also, I make no judgement on two matters. One is the issue of the worth of the way in which Western civilisation has developed and evolved. As with any civilisation it has both its strengths and its weaknesses. The road taken necessarily means other roads not taken. The other is the relationship between the ideas and beliefs of Western civilisation and the power which Western states have exerted over the past few centuries. One can say that the development of the state based on corporatism does provide a considerable potential for the wielding of state power and nominalism the potential for exerting power over nature. That is not the same thing as to say they were the causes of the emergence of Western power. To explain such matters, one needs to look at more mundane factors such as the fact that Europe never experienced the fury of the Mongols in the thirteenth century and the Darwinian like competitiveness of the European state system.

The study of Western civilisation is a very rewarding intellectual enterprise. Any conclusions regarding its nature will only ever be provisional. The more that is known about not only Western civilisation but also the other civilisations of the world the more that we shall need to reconsider our views on human beings and human nature.

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<sup>27</sup> Philip Mansel, *Constantinople: City of the World's Desire, 1453–1924*, Penguin, London, 1995, 45–6

<sup>28</sup> 'An Edict from the Emperor Ch'ien-Lung to King George III,' *An Embassy to China: Being the Journal Kept by Lord Macartney*, Folio Society, London, 2004, 252—255.