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Initiative for an "Alliance of Civilizations"

Workshop on "What is 'Civilization'"

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*Civilization: Truth or Tool*

“The idea of civilization emerged in the course of Western history and has played a considerable role in both shaping the history of Western futures and views of the Western past.” Do we start here? Surely there is a problem in choosing this as a starting point. The phrase “the idea of civilization” is susceptible to too many understandings. For one thinker, the idea refers specifically to the division of labor and the complexity and cultural efflorescence of urban life. For another, a distinction between a lawful and literate polity and barbarism or savagery is implied. For a third, this idea of civilization denotes the outcome of a “civilizing process” that takes as its opposite an earlier stage of development, rather than some sort of foreign “other.” For a fourth, it provides a tool for justifying imperial aggrandizement and for belittling the attainments of those peoples who labor under the imperialist yoke. For a fifth, the idea provides a generalized label for large cultural aggregates defined largely by religion, geography, and literate culture. Although the fifth interpretation is the most simple-minded, and the most subject to arbitrary definition, it is the one that is today most readily understood. Unlike Ibn Khaldun or Aristotle, we see urban society as the global norm rather than a crowning achievement. Unlike Hobbes and Rousseau, we no longer have an array of savage societies being described for us by travelers to remote lands. Unlike Mill, today’s would-be imperialists shun offensive language that would seem to belittle non-Western cultures. Unlike Elias, today’s public arena displays not the slow abandonment of “uncivilized” practices like dueling, but rather a plethora of violent and sexually exhibitionistic tastes and practices that gain their popularity from being thought of as uncivilized.

Let us turn back to the fifth interpretation. The division of space and time into a set of civilizational entities may not have begun with Spengler and Toynbee, but their essays in classification, although widely different in content, are closer to what is being taught in schools today than are the more sophisticated ideas of the thinkers mentioned above. For today’s political theorists and philosophers, of course, it makes a difference what Aristotle, Ibn Khaldun, Hobbes, Smith, and Mill thought because these writers are situated on the intellectual family tree from which so many of the ideas of civilization

branched off at different points in time. But most current pronouncements about Western or Islamic civilization, or the putative clash between the two, do not rise to that level of sophistication. To take “the clash of civilizations” in particular, probably no more than one in a thousand of those who use the phrase to encapsulate current events has read and digested Huntington’s actual formulation. One more often encounters the sort of people who have visited a website containing verses from the Quran that appear to support their bigoted views and use that information to flesh out the content of the supposed clash. From the point of view of our ongoing crisis, therefore, I don’t believe that a critical re-examination of Western history can yield either a model of what civilization is, or a benchmark against which to appraise the civilizational qualities of non-Western societies. What it can do is demonstrate that the various ideas about civilization that have been introduced over the centuries into Western intellectual circles have invariably been self-serving, self-aggrandizing, and disdainful of other peoples. This is not an exercise that needs doing, however. In a situation where, in oversimplified terms, one party is in a hegemonic position with respect to another party, giving first priority to analyzing—as opposed to criticizing—the mental furniture of the hegemon accedes to and abets the structure of domination. So should we start, then, with a Toynbee-esque list of civilizations? I can’t see any value at all in such an approach. Agreement on what constitute the criteria by which a civilization might be defined is impossible. The history of United Nations efforts to define an ethnic group should be an object lesson. How can one say that there is a Chinese civilization but not a Tibetan one, a Western civilization but not a Russian one? How can peoples be classed as (national) minorities when their religious, social, and cultural practices and beliefs would make them part of a distinctive civilization if they just happened to live on the other side of some political border? One of the irreducible barriers to taking Western thinking about civilization as a benchmark is that the thinkers always classified themselves and their compatriots as civilized. All other peoples (or the Westerners who sometimes spoke on their behalf) thus carried the burden of proving that they were civilized too. Think what you would come to if you started somewhere other than the West. A Confucian immersed in the concept of what is “humane” would start with a firm knowledge that everyone steeped in the Confucian classics and observant of Confucian ethics is by definition humane,” but no one else is

until they exhibit the proper outlook, which in Confucian thinking usually includes a reverence for the Confucian classics. From this starting point, Europe might be “civilized” in its own eyes, but “inhumane” in Chinese eyes. Which term is more to be esteemed? Or suppose one started with Buddhist view that detachment from the material world qualifies one for spiritual advancement, and that advancement toward Buddhahood is a universal goal. Since Western civilization positively wallows in the goods of the material world, a Buddhist might concede to the West the appellation “civilized,” since that is how the Westerners choose to see themselves, but they would not concede that being “civilized” is in any way better than being on the path of the Buddha. Quite the contrary. There is no need to multiply examples. The point is that ownership of the word “civilization,” and knowledge of its admittedly Western genealogy, does not add up to a universal acknowledgement that “civilization” is the most desirable end of human endeavor. Nor does even the Western tradition make such a claim. “Civilization” and “the good” are not synonymous. So let us not attempt to dress a list of civilizational criteria and then look around for groups we can label as civilizations (and conversely groups that are barbaric or savage). Being “civilized,” or belonging to an “official” civilization, does not command sufficient awe either within or without the Western tradition to make this a worthwhile endeavor. My starting point, therefore, will be a recognition that the designation “civilization” has long been and is still today essentially instrumental. It takes very little effort to demonstrate that Western civilization has no coherent history. When the term is used today, whether in a Western Civ. classroom or in a more sophisticated scholarly tome, the intellectual heritage of Greco-Roman antiquity and the spiritual heritage of Semitic monotheism are understood, along with the later traditions of the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Industrial Revolution, to be embodied in the term. Further understood, and the paradox ignored, is the fact that Plato and Aristotle knew nothing of Semitic monotheism; that a Frankish monk of the tenth century knew next to nothing of Greco-Roman antiquity; that a nineteenth century engineer-physicist believed with some reason that science had been both unknown and generally despised from the burning of the library of Alexandria down to the condemnation of Galileo; and that fewer than one in a hundred of the young Americans fighting in Iraq could read the last two sentences and understand what they referred to. Yet each of those

young Americans believes in a Western civilization to which he or she personally belongs. Since we cannot do away with the word “civilization,” there is no easy way to keep it from being used as a tool of domination and subordination. And given the vehemence with which the phrase “clash of civilizations” is deployed in the “war on terror,” there is no way to minimize its importance to contemporary discourse. So I propose that we should accept the instrumental character of the word and recraft it as an instrument of good rather than harm. The master narratives through which we validate Western civilization as something that has been with us since the time of Plato blatantly disregard the fact that hate-filled divisions within this putative entity have recurred with murderous regularity. Roman vs. Greek and Jew, German vs. Roman, Anglo-Saxon and Viking vs. Celt, Orthodox vs. Catholic, Catholic vs. Protestant, French vs. German. My God, what a bloodbath! Yet all within Western civilization, even though none of the combatants recognized this “fact.” That is the magic of master narratives. Following good teleological practice, you start with the conclusion you wish to draw—whatever it is: European peace and unity, justification of colonial oppression, encouragement of xenophobia and bigotry—and you write a history in which that conclusion makes perfect sense. But in so doing you ignore most of the history you are pretending to chronicle, because it does not fit your preformed conclusion. There are scores of ways of writing European history, and there are thousands of historians busying themselves doing so. For most of them, the idea of Western civilization is unimportant. Their topics and the research are too fine grained to involve such grandiose conceptualizing. So in point of fact, the main vehicles for indoctrination in the idea of Western civilization today are not the works of major thinkers and historians, but schoolbooks. Young people are schooled to believe that they are part of Western civilization, presented as a mish-mash of cultural icons, battle stories, religious self-righteousness, and economic and technological exceptionalism; and the schoolteachers who so instruct them do not know any better. On most days, this is simply harmless socialization, instruction in citizenship, and inculcation of a sense of uniform heritage in racially and ethnically complex classrooms. But on some days, which have recently become more frequent, “Western civilization” becomes a shibboleth in the mouths of dividers, haters, and neo-imperialists. This can be changed. Among the scores of ways of writing European history, there are some that put

institutional similarities, shared religious outlooks, and cultural, scientific, theological, and philosophical communication ahead of the Battle of Tours, the Crusades, and the siege of Vienna. There are many writers who see the Muslim historical presence in Iberia, Sicily, Ukraine, Russia, and the Balkans as an integral—not uncreative—part of European history, instead of a nightmare of barbarian occupation, and that recognize the great similarities that exist today between Muslim societies in the Middle East and North Africa and the societies of Europe and North America. The history of Muslim societies too can be told in scores of ways, and just as it is time to renarrate European history, so it is time to renarrate Islamic history. One way to conclude this essay would be to sketch what such a renarration would look like, but I have already done that in my book *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*. Furthermore, to go directly to my preferred solution to the civilization problem would leave unexpressed the instrumental purpose it embodies. Why did Lewis and Huntington put before the public the phrase “clash of civilizations”? There are several possible answers to this question, but the response the phrase evoked among audiences worldwide makes the purposes of its authors irrelevant. Regardless of what they meant, for Islamophobes and neo-imperialists, “clash of civilizations” gave warrant for aggressive war abroad and religious discrimination and suspicion at home. And for militant jihadists, American repetition of the “clash of civilizations” mantra in relation to every aspect of our current crisis lent credibility to a propaganda that said to every Muslim: “The Crusaders and the Jews are bent on slaughtering and subduing you because they can never accept you. Leave your job, join the jihad, sacrifice your life for your Muslim brothers and sisters.” As an instrument of division between “them” and “us”—whichever side you were viewing from—“clash of civilizations” has played a powerful and malignant ideological role. Any tool that would attempt to counter this malignancy must satisfy three criteria: 1) It must be simple and easily reducible to being taught in schools; 2) It must tightly and warmly embrace the “civilizations” that are otherwise portrayed as engaged in an inimitable clash; and 3) It must be as plausibly rooted in history as the narratives of civilizational difference and enmity are. I believe that the idea of “Islam-Christian civilization” satisfies those criteria, and I see no impediment to writing unified narratives of Islamic and European history or to compiling a collection of readings that would demonstrate the unity and cross-

fertilization implied in the term. There will be no denying, of course, the incidents of war between the West and Islam, or the terrible actions of the past few years. But warlike enmity is not destiny. Catholics and Protestants live together today in knowledge of, and mutual willingness to disregard, generations of murderous conflict. The same can be said of the French and German peoples, or of European Christians and Jews. If people can be brought to understand that armed clashes, whether long past or in today's newspaper, do not need to be thought of as arising from unbridgeable civilizational chasms, there can be hope for a positive outcome. But that understanding will not come about without concrete and positive steps being taken at every level, from elementary school textbooks to international political pronouncements.