



Lütfi Sunar (ed.), *Debates on Civilization in the Muslim World*, Oxford, 2017, 433 p.

Reviewed by: Nurullah Ardıç

Since its birth in the mid-18th century, the term “civilization” has shown an unstable trajectory in terms of its popularity, falling from grace for some time only to rise again. During much of the 19th century, when it was a very popular concept, it came to express the superiority of the West over the Rest in the military, economic, cultural, and even ontological senses. This was concomitant with the rise of social-scientific disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, and especially archaeology, and their central concepts (e.g. community and society, progress, civil society etc.), and like all of them, “civilization” emerged and was adapted in the context of the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the rise of the modern state, colonialism, and imperialism.

As is well known, all these processes helped bring the Western civilization to prominence, but they meant quite the opposite for many other societies in the world. The Muslim World was, in this context, one of the hardest-hit parts of the world with its many defeats, crises, traumas, and calamities. However, it was also largely due to this that modern Islamic thinking owes much of its dynamism; most Muslim intellectuals have produced their (often critical) ideas in response to the fundamental challenge posed by the rise of the West. In other words, it was the modern Western civilization’s unavoidable impact that has generated much of the dynamism of the Muslim intellectual production for the last two hundred years. Therefore, most modern Islamic discourses have centered on the concept of civilization.

@ Assoc. Prof., İstanbul Şehir University. nardic@sehir.edu.tr



© İlmî Etüdler Derneği
DOI: 10.12658/D0198
insan & toplum, 8(4), 2018, 160-167.
insanvetoplum.org

In this connection, *Debates on Civilization in the Muslim World* is a nice contribution to the understanding of these discourses. Consisting of three parts, the edited volume contains conceptual and methodological discussions (Chapters 1 to 3), analyses of specific Muslim thinkers' civilizational discourses (Chapters 4 to 10), and an examination of the civilization concept's interrelations with others, including development, globalization, multiculturalism, and intercultural relations (Chapters 11 to 14). The book starts with a nice conceptual exposition by Anthony Pagden, who in his opening chapter, traces the history of the concept and its etymological evolution in Europe in the 18th century, which was often characterized by moral and political considerations, particularly based on the notion of progress. His conceptual tour entails the accounts of many Enlightenment intellectuals from Mill, Mirabeau, and Montesquieu to Rousseau and Kant, and from Condorcet, Hume, and Carli to Ferguson and Smith. Chapter 2 by Lütfi Sunar similarly discusses the emergence of the concept of civilization in the context of 17th- and 18th-century European thought. Focusing on the debates over the notion of (civil) society in the former, and the discourse of (Western) civilization in the latter, Sunar argues that all these Enlightenment-inspired ideas were based on a conjectural, progressivist view of history and that the "Orient" was conceived as the constitutive other of Western civilization, for "othering [was] a natural extension of the concept of modern society" (p. 49). He supports this argument with a sketch of the ideas of some proponents of the Enlightenment, including Vico, Montesquieu, the Scottish philosophers (Hume, Smith, and Ferguson), and Hegel.

Based on a critique of such a progressivist and Euro-centric view of history, Mustafa Demirci argues, borrowing from Davutoğlu (1997), that each civilization has its own "sense of self" and a unique perception of time, space and the world, together producing a civilizational "historical consciousness" (Chapter 3). Relying on this fundamental assumption, he reviews three non-Euro-centric perspectives on the periodization of Islamic history (offered by Goitein, Miquel, and Hodgson), and proposes his alternative periodization building on these accounts. It is a four-stage schema, consisting of (a) the "age of conquests and the foundation" (610-750), (b) the "classical age of the Islamic civilization" (750-1258), (c) the "zenith of the financial power of Islam and the age of empires" (1258-1800), and (d) "colonization by the West and the age of depression" (1800-present). While this proposal presents a nice alternative to Goitein's politics-centered and Miquel's Arabo-centric views, there is an interesting contrast with Hodgson's *histoire-universelle* type approach

that locates Islamic civilization into a world-historical context, as Demirci tends to view Islam as unique and emphasizes its “internal dynamics” (p. 112).

The second part of the volume is dedicated to the critique and expositions of Muslim intellectuals’ civilizational discourses, which is useful in terms of showing their reception of, and reactions to, Western discourses. In this context, Ibn Khaldun and his concept of *umran* (with its two variants: *badawa* and *hadara*) are often brought up as the Muslim ‘equivalent’ of civilizational thinking. In his discussion on them (Chapter 4), Vahdettin Işık argues that Muslims’ reactions to the challenge of Western discourses have often been apologetic and reductionist, and that Ibn Khaldun’s *umran* is a good alternative to the modern civilization concept – again based on the assumption of Islam’s uniqueness. On the other hand, Cemil Aydın argues that the idea of universal civilization (originally produced to justify the Western hegemony) was reproduced by non-Western elites even “when they challenged the idea of the ‘civilizing mission’” (p. 145). Focusing on the cases of pan-Islamic Ottoman intellectuals and pan-Asian Japanese ones from the 1880s through the 1930s, Aydın claims that, although these elites contributed to decolonization by de-legitimizing the Western hegemony, they nevertheless worked within a Eurocentric discursive framework that ultimately reproduced the West’s universality (Chapter 5). Likewise, in his description of the conservative Ottoman and Turkish thinkers’ views of civilization, Necmettin Doğan shows how varied, though often complementary, their criticisms of Western, and advocacy of an Islamic, civilization are (Chapter 6).

In the most provocative chapter of the book, Halil İbrahim Yenigün examines the reception by Muslims of the category of civilization and its purported “rise and demise.” After a brief narrative of the concept in Western political thought based on Bowden (2009), he summarizes leading Muslim figures’ views, including those of Rifa’a Tahtawi, Jamaluddin Afghani, and Sayyid Qutb who positively employed “civilization,” and of Ali Shariati, İsmet Özel and Hamid Dabashi, who rejected it and, the author claims, “shattered the civilizational discourse” (p. 209). Yenigün thus makes three bold arguments; first, “the term *civilization* has possessed a primarily rhetorical value [and] *Islamic civilization* itself emerged as a defensive discourse constructed by Muslim apologists.” Second, civilization has had “little descriptive and normative value for Muslims’ self-understanding.” Third, the civilization concept and the discourse of Islamic civilization are both “obsolete and must be overcome” (all on p. 197; italics original). However, while it is true that

the discourse of Islamic civilization was (and still is) a defensive reaction by Muslims against the Western domination and imperialism, it is difficult to sustain the author's other claims, and he does not do much to substantiate them, other than repeating them over and over, and assuming that pointing to the "dirty" past of the concept (the fact that the "civilization" concept emerged during colonization) would almost automatically disqualify it as a useful category. The author also needs to avoid making some unfounded assertions, including the assumption that "the West as a civilizational category has long since ended" (p. 216) (given the fact that this concept has been re-discovered and widely discussed even in academia in both the West and in the Rest of the world); that only three negative reactions to this concept among Muslim intellectuals, the great majority of whom has overwhelmingly endorsed it and embraced the discourse of Islamic civilization since the late-19th century, would suffice to "shatter" and "overcome" it; that "it is hard to come by with any conception of civilization that is not defined against the conception of 'barbarian' or 'savage'" (p. 217) etc. If, for instance, the author did not ignore some of the more refined cases of the discourse of Islamic civilization such as Malek Ben-nabi's and Ahmet Davutoğlu's, who essentially provided a pluralistic and more or less egalitarian understanding of civilizations, he would have reconsidered the last two assertions. (He would have done the same; moreover, he did not disregard the fact that even Afghani and Qutb did not construct the imperialist West as "barbarian" or "savage.") For defining a civilization (the "West") as the main "other" of one's own does not automatically render it "barbarian" or "savage." An exposition of these refined examples would perhaps show signs of empirical and normative justification for civilization with "definitive foundations," which the author expects from this discourse. Perhaps this would also help the author realize that his main argument that a "meaningful dialogue [among different "traditions"] needs to do away with the ... category of civilization altogether" (pp. 218-19) is itself more normative and subjective than scholarly.

The next three chapters focus on specific Muslim intellectuals and their civilizational discourses. In chapter 8, Javad Miri examines Iranian intellectual Ali Shariati's view of "man and religion" in which he argues that Shariati's modernist-Islamist discourse entails a fusion of French existentialism and the "Shia piety" because he conceives of the universe as a living organism and offers an essentially mystic/Sufi solution to the problems of modern civilization. The author analyzes it in the context of three dichotomies that Shariati focuses on: self vs. community, sacred vs. secular, and religion vs. authenticity. His critique of Western civilization

amounts to its breaking the human beings' ties to the divine thereby creating these dichotomies. However useful, this chapter is hard to follow because it is not systematic enough and is unnecessarily long as it contains many repetitions and many irrelevant sentences – e.g. discussion on Ghaninejad's (a critic of Shariati's) view of tradition and what Muslims should do etc.

Chapter 9 focuses on the Bosnian Muslim philosopher and statesman Alija Izzetbegovic's Islamic discourse. First, Izzetbegovic makes a fundamental distinction, following the German Romantic tradition launched by Herder (though the author does not discuss this), between "culture" and "civilization" in which the former refers to the spiritual aspects of human existence (with implications of other immaterial aspects, e.g. morality, authenticity, art, soul, sacred, community etc.) whereas the latter refers to material and technical ones (e.g. body, positive science, urbanity, consumption, profane etc.). Secondly, he presents a cyclical and dialectical relationship between culture and civilization in which the decline of culture (particularly authenticity and creativity) is associated with its domination by the rising civilization, which eventually results in many negative consequences, such as the rise of materialism, mass culture, alienation, crime rates, and moral degeneration, which the Western civilization has been subject to. But, according to Izzetbegovic, Islamic civilization, too, has experienced a similar domination (by the West) as a result of the decline of its authentic culture, which led to political and moral degeneration, alienation, an imitation-based life-style and even (partly for the same reason) colonization. Finally, Izzetbegovic argues that an Islamic "renaissance" is only possible with the revival of its authentic culture, including its spirituality, creativity, and values, rather than through a technical competition with the Western civilization and the imitation of its culture. The chapter's author, Mahmut H. Akin, presents these ideas in a summary form, with no argument of his own. Though the chapter could be more systematic and succinct, it is still useful for introducing Alija's main ideas as one of the few European thinkers within the Islamist intellectual tradition of the 20th century.

In Chapter 10, Driss Habti compares the discourses of Hasan Hanafi and Abdullah Laroui, two contemporary prominent Arab (Egyptian and Moroccan, respectively) intellectuals. Both influenced by Marxism, Hanafi and Laroui also formulated their civilizational discourses on the dichotomy of tradition (*turath*) vs. modernity. Both were also primarily interested in Arab-Islamic history, suggesting a fundamentally critical re-reading of it to find solutions to contempo-

rary crises of Arabs and Muslims. However, these intellectuals sharply differed on other aspects: While Hanafi adopted an “Islamic Left” position, Laroui’s stance was “secular Marxist.” More importantly, while the former proposed to selectively utilize the “tradition” as an essential method, the latter suggested discarding it completely. Furthermore, Hanafi argued for a search for an “authentic” Islamic civilization based on Revelation (the Qur’an) and early Islam whereas Laroui aimed at an integration with Western modernity, which he regarded as uniting with the universal civilization. Though the chapter conveys these ideas in a comprehensive (and at times critical) manner, it is unnecessarily long and contains many repetitions and an unsystematic writing style, which makes it hard to follow for non-experts.

Part 3 of the book consists of chapters discussing broader issues of modernization, globalization and multiculturalism in terms of the civilizational debates. Syed Farid Alatas’ chapter on “erring modernization” overviews three important Muslim critiques of Western civilization, including those of Said Nursi, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (and Traditionalism), and Syed Hussein Alatas, arguing that they, particularly Nursi and Alatas’ views, present alternative (yet marginalized) social theories inspired by an Islamic outlook. He suggests that a central point in (and the main source of) understanding the problems of Muslim modernization might be the concept of “erring modernization” – erroneous viewpoints and policies adopted by modernizing Muslim elites as a result of Western dominance, producing a fragmented outlook based on imitation and alienation (pp. 341-44). The author cites “Islamic economics” as an example of such an outlook, which has adopted neoliberal and Keynesian assumptions, concepts, and policy options under an Islamic guise.

Next, Yunus Kaya’s chapter on the implications of the globalization debates on Huntington’s infamous Clash of Civilizations thesis argues that the former’s contradictory effects –in the form of both proliferating global identities and increasing inter-civilizational contacts on the one hand, and the rise of indigenous identities and cultures, and the resulting conflicts on the other– do not support Huntington’s arguments. However, the discussion is far from original as the chapter actually consists of a literature review on some aspects of globalization mixed with well-known criticisms against Huntington, and a brief presentation of the results of a previous quantitative research the author did with a colleague on globalization’s impact on anti-immigrant attitudes.

Chapter 13 by Murat Çemrek presents a conceptual discussion on multiculturalism, globalization and civilization. The author argues that, just like globalization has made it impossible for anyone to be “uni-cultural,” it has done so for civilization: no one can be a “mono-civilizational being” (p. 386). However, the overall discussion is characterized by vagueness: it is unclear, for example, if the author suggests the term civilization to be used as a unit of analysis or if we should get rid of it forever; or whether civilizations inevitably clash because they define one another as barbarians (which the author repeats over and over), or they are, in fact, not supposed to clash because they belong to one single “human civilization;” or whether civilizations are reified beings acting as global agents (“Just as every civilization attributes to itself unity, singularity, and even uniqueness, it also labels itself as the *sui generis* universality. Every civilization by implication defines itself as ‘the end of history’” – p. 376) or they are (micro-)socially constructed and dynamic (“We reconstruct civilization every day, again and again – p. 384) etc. Also, the reader is often offered some bold claims that are difficult to sustain – e.g. “Globalization, through liberalization of the market at the global level, is democratizing our world by carrying participation from economy to politics” (p. 378).

The last chapter by Khosrow B. Noaparast entails a critique of what the author calls two “static conceptions of civilization” and a proposal for an alternative one. While the first static (and flawed) position is a universalistic (“Platonic”) view which does not allow for differences among cultures and civilizations, the second, relativistic perspective, best represented by Huntington, takes culture and religion as the basis of civilizations, and sees them as incommensurable. Inspired by a Qur’anic verse (49:13) and Wittgenstein’s “family resemblance” concept, the author suggests an alternative “middle way” that takes all cultures (and civilizations?) as part of the family of a universal human culture while also allowing for their particularities, and suggests a dialogue, rather than clash, of civilizations. Though quite systematic and coherent, the alternative model is not adequately substantiated, for the only concrete example of inter-civilizational “give and take” the author cites is quite debatable: He claims that “Islamic civilization takes rational thinking from Western civilization [i.e. Ancient Greece]... Islamic civilization, in turn, develops the experimental sort of thinking ... the [modern] West takes experimental thinking from Islamic civilization and develops it further... (p. 403). Likewise, the author’s critique of the universalistic view remains a discussion on Plato’s view of knowledge, with no reference to the concept of civilization.

Overall, the edited volume contains many useful discussions on civilization(s), which range from surveys on the concept's journey and its epistemological critiques to its reception by several Muslim thinkers to its relationships with other macro concepts such globalization, development and multiculturalism. These offer a wide array of arguments and depictions, parallel to the vast conceptual space that the book's topic covers. On the negative side, the book could have also included some other important figures among Muslim intellectuals in civilizational debates, such as Malek ben Nabi of Algeria, Rachid el Gannouchi of Tunisia, and Ahmet Davutoğlu of Turkey, which would have enriched the discussion further. Finally, editing could have been done better, particularly for non-native speakers of English, as there are many English errors throughout the book. Overall, however, most of the volume's fourteen chapters are quite useful for those interested in the subject.