

MATERIAL PROGRESS AND SPIRITUAL SUPERIORITY: MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF CIVILIZATION

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Abstract:

The Muslim brotherhood's conception of civilization was framed by the Muslim encounter with the modern West. Inheriting the Salafi-Modernist ambivalence, it has acknowledged the technological-scientific achievements of Western civilization, but denounced its spiritual-moral decadence and called for the return of world leadership to Islam. Within this general framework, the Brothers' understanding of civilization has evolved throughout its existence in different directions according to international and domestic political circumstances. In the Interwar period, Hasan al-Banna, the Society's founder, declared that greed and tyranny brought Western civilization – in its limited materialist sense – to bankruptcy and decline. After independence the Syrian leaders announced their project of reconstructing the Islamic civilization in its comprehensive sense. Under military oppression Sayyid Qutb asserted that pure Islam is the only civilization. Conceptualizations of civilization have continued to diversify among the Muslim Brothers and among their moderate and radical splinter groups in the age of globalization, covering the whole range between inter-civilizational dialogue and clash of civilizations.

Keywords: Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi-Modernism, Western civilization, Islamic civilization, *madaniyya*, *hadara*.

Introduction

The idea of civilization has long engaged modern Islamic reformers. Impressed by the achievements of the West, they tried to sort out the causes of its success and find ways to emulate it without losing their religion and identity. In the second half of the nineteenth century Islamic Modernists Ahmad Khan, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad 'Abduh embraced the notions of reason, progress and unity as part of the Muslim faith. At the turn of the twentieth century, Qasim Amin advocated the liberation of Muslim women in line with the ideals of freedom, progress and civilization.¹ The Salafi Rashid Rida attributed the supremacy of the West to its education and associational life and called for study of the historical, political and social developments underlying its industrial, scientific and technological progress.²

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¹ Hourani 1983.

² Shahin 1989.

In Arabic and related Muslim languages, two different words express the idea of civilization: the inclusive *hadara*, which encompasses all aspects of life, and the more restrictive *madaniyya*, or *'imran*, which is confined to the material aspects.³ *Hadara* is derived from Ibn Khaldun's philosophy of history, which set the civilized life of city dwellers against the rustic life of the nomads (*badw*);⁴ *madaniyya* (Turk *Medeniyet*) is a neologism of the Young Ottomans, who with the inauguration of the Tanzimat reforms in the mid-nineteenth century sought means to adopt Western technologies and institutions without jeopardizing their Islamically-based culture and identity.⁵

The same duality may be observed in the European concept of civilization. In the English and French usages it sums up all aspects of the process – from science and technology to manners and habits – that made modern Western society believe it was superior to "primitive" societies. In the German usage the concept was restricted to the useful, material, aspects of the human existence and subsumed under the more elevated nationally-based *kultur*.⁶ More recently Western notions of civilization have gone in the other direction by focusing on the cultural bases of civilization. Marshal Hodgson in his monumental study of the world civilization of Islam defines his subject as "a relatively extensive grouping of interrelated cultures, insofar as they have shared in cumulative traditions in the form of high culture on the urban, literate level."⁷ As against him, Samuel Huntington's infamous clash of civilizations paradigm describes highly monolithic and immutable Western, Islamic and Confucian blocs defined by culture, and especially religion, in global conflict with each other.⁸ Early Muslim reformers inclined to the German version, a preference that reflected admiration for the material progress of the West along with a sense of Islam's spiritual and moral superiority. Only after independence did they become confident enough to cope with the more comprehensive English and French versions.

Taking up Hale's observation that civilizational consciousness is constructed and flexible rather than primordial and immutable,⁹ this essay examines the evolution of the Islamic concept of civilization within the framework of the Society of the Muslim Brothers from its foundation in the late 1920s to its repression by postcolonial Arab military regimes in the 1950s and 1960s. My analysis proceeds along two major axes, reflecting the alternative restrictive and comprehensive meanings of the term. One is the Brothers' counterpoising Islamic civilization to Western civilization, the other their gradual shift from the religion of Islam to Islam as a civilization. These

³ Qamus al-Ma'ani:

المعنوية: الجانب المادي من الحضارة كالعمران ووسائل الاتصال والترفيه، يقابلها الجانب الفكري والروحي والخلقي من الحضارة

⁴ Ibn Khaldun 1958, 1967.

⁵ Karpat 2000, II-12.

⁶ Elias 2000, 5-9.

⁷ Hodgson 1974, I, 91.

⁸ Huntington 1993, 1996.

⁹ Hale 2014.

have produced three major conceptualizations of civilization. The original concept devised by Hasan al-Banna, the Egyptian founder and leader of the society in the Interwar period, may be called "the decline of Western civilization" paradigm. The other two, which were developed by the next generation of Muslim Brothers in the post-independence era, are the notion of "the glorious civilization of Islam" as elaborated in the intellectual circle of Mustafa al-Siba'i, leader of the Syrian branch of the society, and "Islam as the only civilization" of the Egyptian radical ideologue Sayyid Qutb. It is hoped that this study will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the concept of civilization as historically contingent and of how it is viewed by non-Western intellectuals and activists.

The Decline of Western Civilization

The Society of the Muslim Brothers was founded by Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949) in 1928, four years after the abolition of the Caliphate by the Turkish national assembly, which followed the defeat and dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. It thus represented the effort to fill from below, from among the community of believers (*umma*), the vacuum left by the departure of its supreme religio-political authority. Banna's attitude to Western civilization was framed by the disenchantment of the older generation of Islamic reformers with the senseless carnage of the Great War and the unspeakable suffering it brought to the countries of the Middle East.¹⁰ He was more immediately concerned by the spread of irreligious ideas and Christian missionary activity in Egypt itself, following its subjection to direct British rule after the outbreak of the war.¹¹ Banna's own teachings as leader of the Brotherhood were consolidated in the course of the 1930s and thus coincided with the Great Depression and with the rise of Fascism and Nazism, to whose tyranny and intolerance he was vehemently opposed.¹² The Muslim Brotherhood was designed as a mass movement aiming to offset these factors through the re-Islamization of society, the ousting of the British and the other colonial powers, and the establishment of an Islamic order and state.

Hasan al-Banna was a practical man. Preoccupied with the organization and direction of his association, he had little time to elaborate on overarching abstract constructs such as civilization. In the few cases in which he discusses it, he refers to Western civilization, contrasting it to Islam as a faith and mission (*da'wa*) or to the civilization of the East. In a speech addressed in September 1936 to the leaders of Egypt and the Muslim world at large, *Toward the Light*, Banna describes European greatness as a matter of the past. He concedes that the scientific achievements of Western civilization (*madaniyyat al-gharb*) allowed it to flourish and conquer the world for

¹⁰ Shahin 1989.

¹¹ Mitchell 1969, 1-12; Krämer 2010.

¹² Gershoni 2001.

a while. Now, however, he declared, "it is in bankruptcy and decline," as "dictatorships destroy its political foundations, crises carry away its economic foundations, with millions of unemployed and hungry people, and deviant principles and revolutions that flare up everywhere root out its social foundations." The League of Nations is weak, he added, aggression and deceit reign in international politics, and all humanity is tortured and lives in anxiety. The key reasons for these afflictions are, according to Banna, materialism and greed. Charting the history of world leadership between East and West, he concludes that the time is ripe for the East to raise the banner of Islam and bring justice and peace to the entire world.¹³

The victory of the allies in World War II, the subsequent restoration of democracy and of economic prosperity in Europe, and the coming independence of the Arab lands somewhat mitigated Banna's harsh judgment of the West. Leading writers of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1940s, such as Muhammad al-Ghazali (1917-1996) and Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), made a distinction between Western civilization – which came to include both "the free world" and the Communist world – in its own environment from that in its imperial domains. In regard to the Western internal way of life, they acknowledged the respect for individual freedom, representative parliamentary life and the social spirit in Western Europe and North America, and the quest for equality, mutual responsibility and care for the poor in the Soviet Union. They remained critical of Western democracies for their individualism, licentiousness, moral degeneracy and capitalist exploitation, and of the communist world for its atheism and tyranny. These faults were accentuated with regard to the domination of non-Western peoples, which in the view of the Muslim Brotherhood was motivated by the same two basic afflictions of Western civilization: its materialism and its greed.¹⁴

Another important thinker who helped shape the Muslim Brotherhood's idea of civilization in the period that followed the assassination of Banna in 1949 was the Indian scholar Abu al-Hasan 'Ali al-Nadwi (1914-1999).¹⁵ Nadwi belonged to the Nadwat al-Ulama College in Lucknow, a reformist institution that prided itself for its close connections with the Arab world. In his 1944 seminal work, *What Has the World Lost with the Decline of the Muslims?*, which was written in Arabic and was long stock reading among the Brothers, Nadwi elaborated Banna's scheme of universal leadership into a narrative of religious-moral world history that at the same time served as a blueprint for Islamic regeneration. He traces the roots of modern European civilization – now in its comprehensive sense of *hadara* – to the Greek and Roman civilizations, which respectively excelled in philosophy and culture and in warfare and law, but paid excessive attention to the goods and interests

¹³ Banna n.d. 70-71.

¹⁴ Mitchell, 224-227.

¹⁵ On Nadwi and his thought, see Hartung 2003.

of this world at the expense of religion and faith. These are reflected in today's Europe, which, he claims, is afflicted with merciless materialism – whether capitalist or communist, war-mongering nationalism, exploitation of the colonies, and a suicidal drive evinced in the just invented nuclear bomb.¹⁶ As against these, Nadwi poses the Islamic civilization – for which he still uses the more restrictive *madaniyya*, which in the time of the Prophet and the rightly-guided caliphs embodied a combination of spirit and matter, a religion based on reason, and strong government.¹⁷ Nadwi calls upon the modern Muslims, particularly the Arabs, to revive the Islamic civilization of their ancestors and renew their mission in order to save humanity from the evils of the West.

The Marvels of the Islamic Civilization

The Syrian Society of the Muslim Brotherhood was formed in 1945, on the eve of independence. Its first leader, Mustafa al-Siba'i (1915–1964), had joined Banna while completing his studies at al-Azhar University in Cairo, while other leading members and associates, such as the future ministers Muhammad al-Mubarak (1912–1981) and Ma'ruf al-Dawalibi (1909–2004), studied in France. The organization was based on indigenous religious societies founded under the French mandate, one of which was called The Islamic Civilization (*al-Tamaddun al-Islami*).¹⁸ During the 1950s the leaders of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood formed an intellectual group centered on the newly established Shari'a faculty at the University of Damascus, where Siba'i was serving as dean, whereas the more orthodox branches in the north of the country remained attached to the local Sufi revivalist tradition.¹⁹ Following the unification with Egypt in 1958, the members of the Damascene circle turned their attention to the construction of their own Islamic civilization. They were encouraged in this endeavor by the democratic experience of the young republic, in which they took active part, although their activity was repeatedly interrupted by army coups, which usually led to their persecution. After the rise of the Ba'th to power in 1963 the Muslim Brotherhood became the main opposition in Syria, until it was eventually liquidated by Hafiz al-Asad's forces in the wake of the failed Hama uprising in 1982.²⁰

The Muslim Brothers' intellectuals aimed at a comprehensive meaning of civilization, for which they now embraced the notion of *hadara*. They undertook the task of regenerating the glorious cultural and material Islamic edifice of the past and of demonstrating its actual and potential role for modern human civilization. The trend was set by Mustafa al-Siba'i in his *The Marvels of Our Civilization*, which appeared in 1959. Following in the footsteps of Nadwi – who a few years earlier was an affiliate in the Shari'a faculty – Siba'i strove to give his work an academic hue,

¹⁶ Nadwi 2001, 192ff.

¹⁷ Nadwi 2001, 157–163.

¹⁸ Reissner 1980, 89–90.

¹⁹ See Weismann 1993.

²⁰ Lefèvre 2013.

though his scheme is sociological rather than historical. He defines civilization as a social order which helps man increase his cultural output, and identifies four components in its constitution: economic resources, political arrangements, ethical traditions, and sciences and the arts. The factors leading to the decline of civilizations are, according to Siba'i, moral and intellectual slackening, infringement of the laws, the spread of exploitation and poverty, and lack of apt leadership. The entire discussion is framed within the general theory of the rise and fall of civilizations, and more particularly Hegel's philosophy of history which accords each civilization its place on the ladder of human progress.²¹

For Siba'i, then, Islam is one link in the great chain of human civilization, albeit by far the most important. From the belief in God's unity he derives not only Islam's long acclaimed universal appeal and moral bent, but also the more controversial Modernist-Salafi claims about its integration of science and faith, religion and state, and the reign of law. Offended by the treatment of Islamic civilization at the hands of Western scholars, Siba'i maintains that their failure lies in the adoption of pure materialist criteria, by which each civilization admittedly supersedes its predecessors, while overlooking spiritual-moral criteria, wherein Islam had long since attained the peak. As against the Western critique, he apologetically seeks to prove throughout his book the firm bases of classical Islamic civilization and its great contributions to world civilization in general and to the formation of modern Western civilization in particular. Siba'i finds the fingerprints of Islam *inter alia* in the Reformation, in modern sciences, in the literary works of Boccaccio, Shakespeare and Dante, and even in the ideals of the French revolution and Napoleon's civic code. Islamic grandeur is apparent to this day, he maintains, in its promotion of social solidarity, racial equality, religious tolerance, war ethics and compassion for animals, as well as in its past great cities, schools, libraries and hospitals.²²

In the summer of 1960 the Syrian society of the Muslim Brotherhood re-launched its mouthpiece – *al-Muslimun* (The Muslims) – in a new high-quality format under the title *Hadarat al-Islam* (The Civilization of Islam). The change reflected, in the words of Siba'i in his inaugural editorial, the new era the Muslim nation was living through and the expectations this sparked for new civilizational horizons of self-determination, independence and respect. For the Muslim Brotherhood the glorious past of the *umma*, which was based on its philosophy and faith, was the prelude to a bright future, in which the awakened *umma* would again take the lead in liberating other nations and guiding them to a life of bliss and prosperity. The Muslims played a leading role in the evolution of human civilization and it was time for them to resume their mission among the nations. The new journal was to take

²¹ Siba'i 1998, 35.

²² Siba'i 1998.

part in the cultural regeneration of the Islamic civilization by reviving and disseminating its heritage.²³

Hadarat al-Islam provided the Syrian Muslim Brothers and like-minded enlightened Islamist thinkers in other countries a platform to explore Siba'i's initial insights and to elaborate their own ideas. Its pages were devoted to studies on Islamic faith and jurisprudence and of great Muslim cities, societies and personalities, along with news from the Arab and Muslim worlds and selective reports from the West. Prominent foreign writers invited to contribute to the journal included the Indian scholar Abu al-Hasan 'Ali al-Nadwi and his slightly older contemporary Pakistani radical Abu al-'Ala al-Mawdudi (1903-1979), who discussed the place of Islam in South Asia's civilization, the Moroccan scholar Muhammad Muntasir al-Kattani (1914-1998) with his studies of the Islamic centers of Fes and Chinguetti (Ara. Shinqit, in Mauritania), and the Algerian philosopher Malik bin Nabi (1905-1973), who tackled the role of religious thought in the constitution of civilizations. Among the Syrian contributors Ma'ruf al-Dawalibi, who held a Ph.D. in law, touched on the constitutional principles of Islam, while more conservative jurists from the Shari'a faculty, such as Mustafa al-Zarqa (1904-1999), explored various aspects of Muslim law.

Regular sections in *Hadarat al-Islam* compared favorably the Islamic civilization to Western civilization by juxtaposing reports about the exemplary behavior of the Prophet and his companions to contemporary stories about the misbehavior of Western societies toward women and the weak. For instance, hadiths narrating how Abu Hurayra, a famous *sahabi* set free a slave girl instead of punishing her and how 'Amr ibn al-'As, the conqueror of Egypt, appointed a black man to head a delegation to the Bishop of Babylon, are contrasted with news reports about ongoing slavery in the sub-Saharan French colonies and about white men in America beating and murdering blacks for no reason. There were also translations of articles from the Western press or books that praised Islamic civilization or "proved" the degeneration of the West.

Among the most valuable contributions to the discussion of civilization on the pages of *Hadarat al-Islam* was a series of articles by Muhammad al-Mubarak, doyen of the Shari'a faculty and Siba'i's second in the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, who had specialized in Arabic and French literature and in sociology during his studies at the Sorbonne. Mubarak reflected in these articles on the meaning and criteria of civilization in its broad sense, its laws of evolution, the road to the creation of a human civilization, and the crisis of contemporary humanity. As the sequel indicates, his aim was to show the superiority of what he refers to as the Arab-

²³ Siba'i 1960.

Islamic civilization over the West and the relevance of its mission to lead humanity in modern times. Mubarak's definition of civilization states that it is "the totality of knowledge, laws, institutions, customs and manners that represent the intellectual, economic, moral, political and artistic situation in a specific historical stage and geographical area of one nation or more." In an echo of Siba'i's apologetics he distinguishes the manifest form of civilizations, which is the product of the cumulative effort of past generations, from their hidden form which harbors their unrealized potentialities. A good civilization, according to Mubarak, is one that harmonizes all aspects of life – the intellectual, material, moral, social, and personal – and that distributes their goods among the largest number of people and of nations.²⁴

Mubarak concurs that modern civilization is the fruit of all its predecessors. Of particular importance in this respect are the ancient Greeks (and Romans), who sowed the seeds of rational thought; Christianity, which devoted itself to the education and training of the human soul; and the Arab-Islamic civilization, which completed both while raising the level of social solidarity within and among the nations. Mubarak acknowledges the spectacular achievements of modern civilization in enlarging man's knowledge, particularly in the natural sciences, raising the standard of living and creating leisure time, guaranteeing material and spiritual human rights, and producing great thinkers. But its flaws are equally mighty. For one, he reiterates the common third-world postulate that human rights guaranteed to Western nations are high-handedly denied by them to non-Western peoples. Even more serious in Mubarak's view as a believer is the neglect of spiritual education (*tahdhib al-nafs*), which breeds selfishness and greed instead of conscience and justice. Modern Western civilization liberated man from nature, but not from himself.²⁵ In evolutionary terms, this means that while the West is the most progressive in the intellectual and industrial fields, it has actually regressed in the moral field.²⁶

The Arab-Islamic civilization, Mubarak argues, excelled in those same areas which modern civilization has overlooked, as well as in those it has promoted. Islam gives reason its due place by directing it to contemplate on God's physical creation, while the sacred Law encourages progress and promotes social solidarity among people, nations and religions. More important still, it elevates the human soul by treating man's desires – wealth, pleasure, work, and eventually knowledge – as means to a higher goal rather than as ends in themselves. The belief in Allah creates a firm bond between the individual "I" and the absolute Being, from which are derived man's aspiration to comprehend the universe, as well as his will to extend his hand to fellow human beings and his quest to support the truth and fight injustice. The

²⁴ Mubarak 1961a. 23–25.

²⁵ Mubarak 1961a. 25–28.

²⁶ Mubarak 1960.

combination of intellectual and spiritual belief in God is, according to Mubarak, what distinguishes Islam from all other civilizations and makes them its rivals. As against it, the Greek, Roman, and Modern European civilizations – the last-named undermining the foundations of the intervening Christian civilization – are materialist, deny God, and worship wealth, pleasure and reason in both their individualistic or collectivistic versions.

The Arabs, Mubarak points out, played a special role in the development of the Arab-Islamic civilization, because they were the first nation to receive the Islamic call, and they spread it out far and wide without regard to race, nation or class. It was they, he claims, who introduced the principles of human dignity and human rights, promoted knowledge and the rule of justice and also, in reflection of the distinct socialist discourse of the Syrian Muslim Brothers at the time, fought poverty and set a minimum wage.²⁷

Mubarak's scheme for the regeneration of the Arab-Islamic civilization, and through it the elevation of humanity at large, is Modernist-Salafi. The Muslim societies that encountered modern Western civilization in the course of the nineteenth century, he maintains, were weak and lifeless. They were very far from the magnificent civilization of their ancestors in the formative period of Islam, when culture and science flourished; there was unity and cooperation among the Muslim nations, government was based on consultation (*shura*) and transparency, and minorities lived in safety. All this changed in the following generations, during which sterile doctrinal disputes, blind imitation in matters of law (*taqlid*) and Sufi superstitions made the people idle and resigned to iniquitous and tyrannical rulers. Consequently, Mubarak reasons, from the twelfth century on, the initiative shifted to the West, where it matured in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the industrial revolution, the rise of capitalism and democracy, and the spread of nationalism. These positive developments, however, were accompanied by the negative traits of secularism, class conflict, and colonial conquest and exploitation.²⁸

The Western invasion (*ghazw*) was military and political, as well as social and ideological. It brought about the awakening (*nahda*) of the East, but was also the cause of a deepening worldwide spiritual and moral crisis. Mubarak urges the Arabs in the countries that have just freed themselves from the yoke of colonialism to regain their civilizational mission and save humanity from its current predicament. The Arabs should not imitate the West, but also not cling to their customary traditions. Instead, they should selectively absorb useful Western innovations while reviving their old heritage, which was based on belief in God, balance between the

²⁷ Mubarak 1961b.

²⁸ Mubarak 1961c.

spiritual and material aspects of life and the promotion of social solidarity, equality of opportunities, distributive justice and compassion for the weak.²⁹

The military coup that brought the secular minority-dominated Ba'th party to power in Syria in March 1963 ended the democratic experience of the country in general and the Muslim Brotherhood's hopes for a religious-civilizational revival in particular. Within a year, a bloody clash erupted between the new regime and the Islamic opposition following which Siba'i's successor, Issam al-'Attar (1927-), and many of his comrades found themselves in exile. These dire circumstances were promptly reflected on the pages of *Hadarat al-Islam*, which shifted its center of gravity from intellectual discussions on religion and civilization to the more pressing needs of the struggle against the ungodly regime. In his editorial of the journal's fourth year in August 1963, Siba'i stressed the need to continue to speak the truth and spread Islam (*da'wa*). The following issues were dominated by articles on lessons from the conduct of the Prophet and excerpts from Hasan al-Banna's treatise on jihad. Civilization had to be postponed to better times, which are yet to come.

Islam Is the Only Civilization

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood initially supported the Free Officers' revolution of July 1952. Relations turned rapidly sour, however, after Jamal 'Abd al-Nasser consolidated power in his hands. The charismatic President ordered the dissolution of the society in January 1954, in the wake of an alleged attempt on his life, and by December six of its leaders had been executed, while thousands of members were arrested and tortured in what one scholar has referred to as concentration camps.³⁰ While most members of the Muslim Brotherhood remained committed to the peaceful way of *da'wa*,³¹ some were radicalized by these bitter experiences.

The formulation of the militant ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood was undertaken by Sayyid Qutb, the foremost thinker of the organization in the critical period that followed Banna's assassination in 1949. Qutb began his career as a literary critic, but in the 1940s he converted to Islam in protest against the corruption of the Egyptian monarchy, and in the early 1950s he joined the Muslim Brotherhood after a prolonged traumatic visit to America.³² In *Ma'alim fi al-tariq* (Signposts), the radical manifesto he authored in prison before his own execution in 1966, Qutb presented a dichotomous view of Islam and barbarity (*jahiliyya*), the latter encompassing not merely Western civilization, but also most Muslim countries of his day. For him, moreover, an unavoidable "clash of civilizations" had to be preceded, to paraphrase Emmanuel Sivan's apt response to Huntington's infamous paradigm, by a clash

²⁹ Mubarak 1960. 220-223; 1961b. 34. For the role of the Arabs in leading the Islamic nation and its mission to the West see also Nadwi 1963.

³⁰ Kepel 1985. 27-30.

³¹ Zollner 2009.

³² On the formation of Qutb, see Musallam 2005; Calvert 2010.

within the Islamic civilization,³³ in which a dedicated vanguard was called to wage jihad against their own rulers and societies. The gradual release of the Muslim Brothers from prison by President Anwar al-Sadat in the course of the 1970s gave the radical elements the opportunity to further elaborate and implement Qutb's ideas.³⁴

The notion of civilization that Sayyid Qutb elaborated in *Signposts* combines different meanings that reflect the various strands in the formation of his Islamist ideology. Though not always consistent, together they express a politically and culturally based exclusivity, which defies not only Western civilization and its imitators in the Muslim world but ultimately Western understanding of what civilization is. Qutb appears to build on the insights gained in the Muslim Brotherhood since Banna's time when he declares, at the very beginning of his manifesto, that the West – in both its democratic-capitalist and dictatorial-socialist forms – is on the verge of collapse because of its lack of values. Like Nadwi, and the contemporary Syrian Muslim Brothers, he maintains that it was high time the Muslims resumed their mission to lead the world in the struggle to free humanity from the shackles of present-day barbarity. Going farther back, to the general Islamic reformist distinction between the material and the comprehensive aspects of civilization, Qutb promises time and again that the Islamic movement will by no means relinquish the technological inventions of the Western genius; it will rather animate them with the faith they lack and direct them on the right path.³⁵ But he also goes beyond all that by boldly asserting that Islam is eventually the only real civilization.

In the tradition of the Muslim Brotherhood, Qutb does not deny the merits of other civilizations. He praises the ancient Greeks and Romans for their valuable contributions in the fields of philosophy, the arts and law, and the Persians for their excellence in poetry and the arts of government, as well as the Indian and Chinese civilizations. But in contrast to Siba'i's endeavor to tie Islam to the march of world civilization, Qutb takes the opposite direction and seeks to distance the Islamic civilization from all others. Adopting a particularly restricted form of Salafism, he argues that the first generation of Muslims in the Arabian Peninsula, the unique Qura'nic generation, was acquainted with the other civilizations of its time, but to keep the purity of its faith it consciously shunned them all and concentrated on fulfilling the commandments of God's book alone. The following generations diluted the Qur'anic message with borrowings from other civilizations.³⁶

In apparent discrepancy, Qutb also claims that the Islamic civilization was formed when the different Muslim races and nations joined forces and cooperated, on the

³³ Sivan 2003.

³⁴ Kepel 1985.

³⁵ Qutb n.d. 3-4.

³⁶ Qutb n.d. 12-14.

sole basis of their common faith, in creating an Islamic society and culture. In the face of Nasser's triumphant Arab nationalism, Qutb stresses that "this marvelous civilization was not 'an Arab civilization' even for one day." It was an Islamic civilization, to which each race contributed its special qualifications and brought in its personal, national and historical experiences, for the common goal of establishing an egalitarian society bonded in God.³⁷

Sayyid Qutb's discourse turns increasingly radical as he sets out to develop an Islamic conception of civilization. His definition rests on the notion of the duality of divine and human sovereignty (*hakimiyya*). He formulated this thinking through the ideas of Mawdudi, the founder of the Jama'at-i Islami in India-Pakistan.³⁸ Qutb maintains that a society that attributes sovereignty to God alone and is ruled by the dictates of the shari'a, namely Islamic society, liberates men from enslavement to one another and guarantees their dignity; it thus constitutes a human civilization. In societies divided between ruling masters and obedient subjects and governed by man-made laws, as are Western capitalist and Marxist societies alike, as well as most contemporary Westernized Muslim societies, men are humiliated and fettered. Such societies, Qutb declares, have no civilization at all. In this radical version, Islam is not only a unique civilization; it is ultimately the only one.³⁹

The fundamental Salafi-Modernist distinction between the spiritual and material aspects of civilization undergoes a corresponding shift. Islamic society is civilized, according to Qutb, because it regards human values and morality as paramount, while all other, jahili, societies are backward and uncivilized because they attach supreme value to matter. Human moral values, he asserts, are promulgated in the Qur'an in unambiguous terms, and their purpose is to distinguish man from animal on the individual level and to promote humanity on the collective level. Individual morality is embedded above all in the family, the building block of society and the principal agent of acculturation of the young. Deeply disturbed by the sexual promiscuity he had witnessed on his visit to the United States before he joined the Muslim Brotherhood, Qutb came to regard the emancipation of women as the hallmark of Western backwardness and bestiality.

Collective morality derives, in Qutb's view, from the divine source rather than from the human sphere. This means that Islamic society is unique and cannot be explained by the general rules of the rise and evolution of *jahili* societies. It has developed from its own movement out of the eternal principles of the Qur'an, though their manifestations have varied throughout history according to the stage of its economic scientific and industrial development. Moreover, like the *jahiliyya*, to which it is

³⁷ Qutb n.d. 52-53.

³⁸ On Mawdudi and his teachings see Nasr 1994, 98-124.

³⁹ Qutb n.d. 105-109.

contrasted, Islamic civilization is not merely an occurrence of the past; it is a supra-historical existential condition, which prevails whenever the divine moral principles govern and restrain material greed. It is ultimately the goal that all humanity may one day ascend to, to overcome the abyss of the *jahiliyya* and establish God's sovereignty on earth.⁴⁰

Still, along with this radical interpretation of civilization, Qutb also holds to the older apologetic one, which claims an Islamic precedent to modern Western achievement. He argues, for example, that the roots of the experimental method, the foundation of European industrial civilization, lie in Islamic Andalusia and in "the East," rather than in medieval Europe. The scientific experimentation method was developed, in his view, out of the Islamic concept of the physical world and its mysteries. Subsequently, Europe embarked on its scientific revolution and reached exalted achievements while forgetting their Islamic basis. The Muslim world, on the other hand, lost its scientific momentum and ultimately abandoned it altogether. Its inner weaknesses and the crusaders' and the Zionists' [sic] invasions distanced it from Islam. Muslims are therefore allowed to study from the West the technical sciences – physics, astronomy, medicine or management, but they must never learn from the Orientalists about Islam or rely on Western philosophy of history, sociological traditions and political sciences.⁴¹

Conclusion

The Muslim Brotherhood's notion of civilization is part of the ongoing modern Muslim reformist tradition, which emerged among the Muslim peoples in the second half of the nineteenth century in the wake of their painful encounter with the West. The Brothers inherited the basic ambivalence that characterized the early Modernist-Salafi response to the formidable political and cultural challenges imposed on them. On the one hand, in their quest to join the modern caravan, the early reformers acknowledged the material achievements of Western civilization – in its restricted sense of *madaniyya* – and called on Muslims to adopt them, as long as they did not contradict the shari'a. On the other hand, in defense of their faith and sense of identity, they announced Islamic spiritual superiority over a morally decadent West, though not Islam as it was practiced in their day but in the imagined pure form of the original exemplary path of the Prophet and his immediate followers.

Within this broad reformist Modernist-Salafi framework, the Muslim Brotherhood's understanding of civilization has evolved throughout its existence in different, and at times even opposite, directions. In the course of this evolution they also shifted

⁴⁰ Qutb n.d. 109–122.

⁴¹ Qutb n.d. 129–131.

to the more comprehensive term *hadara*. The changing perceptions of civilization reflected circumstances of time and space, and more specifically the relevant political exigencies. The article analyzed three major conceptualizations of civilization elaborated within the Society of the Muslim Brothers from its founding in the late 1920s to its repression by post-colonial authoritarian Arab regimes in the 1950s and 1960s. These are the conceptualizations of Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the organization in the interwar period; of Mustafa al-Siba'i's Syrian circle in the early days of the Syrian republic; and of Sayyid Qutb, the prophet of Islamic radicalism in Nasserist Egypt.

For Hasan al-Banna, civilization was still basically Western civilization. Consolidating his views in the 1930s, during the Great Depression and the subsequent rise of Fascism and Nazism in Europe, he declared that materialism and tyranny brought the West to bankruptcy and decline, and that world leadership should return to the banner of Islam. His comrades who referred to Western civilization after the Allied victory in World War II, returned to a more balanced view. Distinguishing the capitalist from the communist world, they praised the freedoms and social spirit of the former and the quest for equality and care for the poor of the latter, while criticizing their respective licentiousness and exploitation, atheism and tyranny. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood embarked on its civilizational project in the late 1950s, in the wake of independence and the initial democratic period in Syria. Overly optimistic about the prospects of an Arab-Islamic revival, Mustafa al-Siba'i, Muhammad al-Mubarak and their colleagues turned their energies to the reconstruction of their own Islamic civilization that would connect the Muslims, and especially the Arabs, to the great chain of world civilization. In a truly Modernist vein, the task they took upon themselves was to "prove" the greatness of the Islamic civilization in the past and the importance of its spiritual-moral mission to all humanity also in modern times.

At that very time, Sayyid Qutb was formulating his radical view of the Islamic civilization in the prison of Nasser's authoritarian regime in Egypt. In contrast to his Syrian comrades, the embattled Qutb distanced Islamic society entirely from all other societies, denied any privilege to the Arabs, and ultimately declared that Islam was the only civilization. In a strictly Salafi mode, he urged young Muslims to follow the example of the Qur'anic generation and form an Islamic vanguard to wage jihad against the surrounding forces of *jahiliyya* and establish God's sovereignty on earth.

Muslim Brotherhood thought in general, and its conceptions of civilization in particular have continued to develop and diversify after the 1970s. In the early 1980s

Sa'id Hawwa, the principal ideologue of the Syrian Brothers under the Ba'th, followed a middle way between the radicals and the moderates. Deploring the present weakness of the Muslims, he charted for them a new world civilization based on the Islamic principles of reason and experience, the government and the people.⁴² With the advent of globalization in the 1990s moderates and radicals drifted further apart. While the Wasatiyya party of Yusuf al-Qaradawi has called for creative interaction with the world through a new combination between Western achievement and the Islamic heritage,⁴³ al-Qaeda adopted the clash of civilizations mentality and anchored it in the Qur'an and *sunna*.⁴⁴ The initial democratic promise of the "Arab spring" at the beginning of the second decade of the new millennium might have reinforced the moderate inclusive camp; its appalling failure seems to again encourage the radical exclusivist one.

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⁴² Hawwa 1984.

⁴³ Habib 2010.

⁴⁴ Lawrence 2005, 124-125.

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