

Home > The Mystery of Life > Civilizations: The Principles and the Presumptions > The Relationships between Civilizations

Civilizations: The Principles and the Presumptions

The rise and development of civilizations does not follow a continuous pattern – changing from simple to complex. In other words, we cannot find any definite reason for why a civilization arises, and analyze it from scientific, philosophical, artistic or sociological points of view. If civilizations were phenomena identifiable in specifications, identity, or reasons, there would never be so much debate among scientists now.

Furthermore, it is never possible to foresee the rise of a civilization. Some scholars believe civilizations to be a result of human need, but this is not always the case, and many civilizations have come into being due to man's mental genius. Feeling the necessity to catch up with other rival communities can also lead to the birth of new cultures and civilizations. The two factors we have mentioned are significant, but not sufficient.

Man studies civilizations not to get to know their people and their life, but because civilizations and cultures are created by human endeavor, so studying them can reveal man's primary and secondary needs, and the quality, quantity and strength of his physical and spiritual ideals. Thus, the more we know about man and the various aspects of his existence, the deeper our knowledge of civilizations will be.

The Difference between Civilization and Culture

Culture is the necessary or proper quality in man's physical or mental activities, based on sound logic and emotions arising from sensible evolutionary lifestyles.

Civilization is the establishment of order and harmony in social relationships, eliminating all interfering conflicts, and setting a competition towards development and perfection, where the people's social life makes their potentials begin to flourish.

Therefore, the differences between civilization and culture can be summarized as:

1- Culture points out the knowledge, goals, and ideals of a society, whereas civilization represents “the activities of the original factors of individual and social life.” This is why civilizations naturally find their way into other societies, but not cultures; there should always be a dominant culture and a weaker one.

2- If the factors creating a culture are destroyed, it will no longer be dynamic, and only traces of it may remain; civilizations, on the other hand, never become obsolete, for they are quite dependent upon the original factors of life. In other words, its stagnancy does not cause it to fade away.

3- Various cultures have risen throughout history; we have as many cultures as there are nations and peoples, some of which have disappeared. There have been, however, only 21 civilizations.

Some points civilizations have in common are:

a) Rights based on justice, which provide man's social life with order and harmony. These rights are among the true ideals of life, and can be generalized for all societies.

b) Discovering the best way to fight factors harmful to nature and mutinous men is one of the ideal elements of civilization in all human societies.

c) Another ideal element in every civilization is logical political management which can bring order and discipline among the members of the society, and help them develop in all aspects.

d) Discovering and using the technology necessary for fulfilling man's needs in life, and making use of the human mind and natural resources in order to provide people with comfort is also among the highest of civilizational principles.

e) Intelligible interpretation and justification of human mental and physical deeds is the outcome of man's vital energy. This element should not be considered solely from a “purely natural efficiency” aspect.

On the other hand, culture has activities and effects exclusive to a certain society and its people only. If the culture of a society originates from the true factors of human life and provides them with a dynamically flourishing life, it can be called a “civilization-making” culture.

Civilization can be studied from two different points of view:

1- The man-oriented point of view, in which civilization is an organization of human beings, in which all individuals and social groups have fine relationships and participate in advancing the physical and mental goals in order to achieve an intelligible life, where all human potentials and capabilities are activated.

This definition both includes the goals and ideals of societies, and shows the relationships between them.

2- The power-oriented point of view, which believes civilization to activate every potential and employing

all forms of power, in order to advance the goals of ordinary, natural life.

This point of view ignores human development and the unity of mankind, and is totally focused on gaining power and the desire for it. In such a civilization, there is no interest in man or his values and virtues. Man's goal is believed to be reaching advanced science and technology which can provide man with luxury and the ability to do as he pleases.

What Elevates a Civilization

- 1- Deep commitment to good values,
- 2- Commitment to good deeds,
- 3- People's tendency to great ideals,
- 4- Great efforts in times of great danger, and attempting to overcome problems,
- 5- People's commitment to keeping their promises,
- 6- Practicing charity,
- 7- Avoiding haughtiness,
- 8- People's good intentions,
- 9- Spiritual well-being of the members of the society,
- 10- Righteousness being the basis of everyday life affairs,
- 11- Being influenced by elevated motivations,
- 12- Resistance against cruelty,
- 13- Justice for all,
- 14- Patience and control of one's temper,
- 15- Avoiding corruption in the world,
- 16- Commitment to affection and kindness,
- 17- Making use of one's power to eliminate physical or spiritual disturbances,
- 18- Great effort in times of tests of faith or difficulties,
- 19- Agreement on ideals and tendencies,

20- Balance in desires,

21- Penetrating visions.

The Basic Reasons Why Civilizations Fall

The basic reason for the demise of civilizations lies in this principle: “I exist, so you do not,” or “Your existence depends on whether I want it or not.” This is truly the essence of atrocity. As the Holy Qur’an says:

فكأين من قرية أهلكناها فهي ظالمة

“How many a city we have destroyed in its evildoing.”(22:45)

Cruelty can be regarded as “violating the true laws of intelligible life.” Thus, the meaning of cruelty is unlimited and can include the following:

- 1- Even the slightest ignorance of one's conscience is cruelty to oneself.
- 2- Allowing the smallest violation of one's rights by others is cruelty to oneself.
- 3- Decreasing the value of human effort and its products is cruelty.
- 4- Creating circumstances in which man has to give up his work or occupation – whether willingly or otherwise – is cruelty.
- 5- Creating a dictatorship in which minds deteriorate is cruelty.
- 6- Disturbing the freedom of others is cruelty, even if the satisfaction of the violated one is provided by deviating from the meaning of freedom.
- 7- Creating artificial demand among people to sell imposed, worthless goods or ideas is cruelty.
- 8- Manipulating people's thoughts and emotions in order to impose one's ideas is cruelty.
- 9- Making the minds of the people a showcase for one's righteousness is a violation of their character, and cruelty.
- 10- Volunteering for the position of political leadership when one cannot control one's own desires or greed for pleasure and selfishness is cruelty to the society.
- 11- Destroying an advantage or benefit that can solve people's problems or sooth their pains is itself the

worst kind of cruelty to mankind, let alone using the benefit as a weapon against man.

The Unconditional Philosophical Principles of Civilizations

In identifying civilizations, we must keep in mind the principles all of them have in common. The five principles all civilizations have in common are:

Principle One: The Self-love of Life

Self-love (egotism) is an undeniable principle of life. Self-protection, love for one's ego, natural selfishness, and attempts toward safeguarding life are some of its manifestations. There are two kinds of self-loves:

a) Positive, or intelligible, self-love,

b) Negative self-love.

Self-love is seen in animals too, but in human beings its range of activity is unlimited. Animals have no culture or civilization. Man, on the other hand, has the intelligence and various talents to develop himself and create different cultures and civilizations.

Human self-love is influenced by social factors, established ideals of the society and man's own physical and mental products. Developing man's awareness and selecting higher aims for life can control human self-love and guide it to the right path. This is what we may call intelligible self-love, which makes man consider the life of other people valuable and try to help them develop themselves.

Those who do not possess intelligible self-love are lured by their natural selfishness, and use all of their potentials to reinforce it. If natural selfishness is transformed into intelligible self-love, however, a civilization will be created that would never deviate from the path of evolution and perfection, and would be infallible.

Skyscrapers and advanced technology do not make an ideal civilization. Neither does high-speed transportation, sophisticated inventions or saturating selfish desires, which make us forget all about the philosophy of life. Such advances are valuable when they serve to activate man's talents and great human virtues.

In brief, it is the moderation of self-love that makes an ideal civilization, which moves on the road of intelligible life.

Principle Two: The Economy

It is impossible to ignore the role of economy in developing or destroying a nation. The economy is not merely a component of a civilization; it ensures the survival of human life. Economic well-being and

comfort is, however, not the main cause of a civilization. Although no civilization can arise without economic order and comfort, achieving it does not necessarily imply a perfect civilization.

There are civilizations enjoying economic luxury but devoid of great human virtues, like justice, moderation, love and many others. Economic progress provides the best grounds for the mental and psychological development – in many different aspects – of the members of the society. In other words, when the economic aspect of human life is fulfilled through logical economic principles, the best and even most essential background for human development in all aspects is provided.

Principle Three: Free Will and Freedom

Freedom and free will are both necessary for a civilization to arise, and for it to survive, for if human beings cannot feel themselves autonomous in their activities, they will begin to feel like machines guided under no freedom at all. In such a case, man will not only be deprived of freedom, but also fall into self-bestrangedness. If social and individual activities do not originate from one's own conscience and freedom, it will be impossible to achieve a civilization truly human-oriented.

We must keep in mind that the significant factor in recognizing the value of a civilization is “the developed freedom called free will” rather than pure freedom itself. Many sociologists take account of freedom in their evaluations of civilizations, but consider freedom as allowing man to do as he wishes. Such a freedom would conflict with conscience and common sense, and make man ignore all of the existing internal and external principles.

Freedom is in fact a path to achieve perfection. Freedom must turn into free will if an ideal civilization is desired, for free will means, using freedom with the purpose of gaining what is good and elevating.

When the human character reaches the level of free will, it always heads for goodness and perfection. Inside such a human being there is constant effort to do good, or act on good intentions. This is the free will founders of a real civilization need in order to achieve a human-oriented civilization.

Principle Four: Stagnant Civilizations Gradually Deteriorate

The activity of a civilization depends on its main resources. If the primary resources of a civilization stop advancing and developing, the civilization will become stagnant. For instance, if its true geniuses and leaders are dead or forgotten, stagnancy will occur.

Every civilization requires its own preservatives, without which it will fade away. Hence, only these civilizations can survive throughout history that rely on dynamic, self-sustained factors.

Principle Five: The Law of Causality

1– Throughout history, there have been men who have claimed to aim for making justice a reality, but

once they gained power, justice was dented. Many a leader has boasted that he would provide his people with prosperity and greatness, but has forgotten all about it when he took charge, and treated people as mere means for his own goals.

2- Mental and physical endeavor, sacrifice, putting aside one's personal desires and tolerating hardships is necessary for any society to develop. Unfortunately, however, some societies forget about the role of people after they achieve victory, and consider their triumph solely as their own.

These points have led some to imagine that humans are not the main factor in achieving social accomplishments. Their reasons for this are:

If a society gains power, will its people have a prosperous life? Science does bring about the knowledge of reality, but has man always acted according to what he knows? Man sets laws to prevent injustice and atrocity, but does he obey them at all times? The answer to all of these questions is negative.

There are a few points we should keep in mind when discussing the domination of the law of causality on human behavior:

1- The law of causality is a general law and applies to all phenomena in the universe. No phenomenon in nature, history, the society or humanity occurs without a cause.

2- Man's will, which has played the main role in many human achievements, defies coincidence and the fact that an effect can occur with no cause. Since human activities are influenced by both internal and external factors, discussing the law of causality in human activities also should be done through considering these factors.

3- There are two ways to lead, justify and account for human will:

a) A fatalistic approach to the human will in an attempt to reach what the leaders of the society want, like moderating will powers to achieve a predetermined, outlined life.

b) Free will power heading for greatness and perfection. The grounds are readied for people to both moderate their desires and to develop themselves.

4- There are many forms of human activities, and sometimes several of them influence an effect. Consider observing many just behaviors from the people when studying a civilization. Does such behavior imply satisfactory law enforcement, or vice versa? Or maybe none, and external forces may have caused the moderations? Or perhaps an extremely elevated set of beliefs? Has fear also been influential, or the love for justice? All the above factors are possible and determining which requires in-depth investigation.

5- When studying human societies and civilizations, it is important to distinguish two kinds of reasons:

- The reason that creates the effect, and
- The reason that allows the effect to continue its existence.

If we are to study civilizations, we should keep in mind that sometimes a factor makes a civilization arise, but for the survival of the civilization other factors are needed.

Now we can resolve one of the most complicated criticisms on the law of causality in civilizations and societies. For example, when looking for the existence of a set of intelligible beliefs and proper rights in a civilized society, we should not jump to the conclusion that since the cause for the arising of these beliefs and rights is present, they can exist forever. When we realize that they have not, we should not conclude that causality has no influence on societies and civilizations!

Now that we have categorized causes into two groups – those that create and those that make existence continue – such a misunderstanding should be eliminated. In order for intelligible beliefs and proper rights to survive, the willingness of the people and other social and geographical factors are important, not the causes that created them.

Conditional Philosophical Principles in Civilizations

When discussing the philosophical principles concerning civilizations, we must keep in mind the fact that the five above-mentioned unconditional principles cannot influence a civilization without limitations from both internal and external factors. Let us take a deeper look at this issue by studying the principles above by relating them to the conditional principles.

1– The unconditional principle of self-love cannot exist without any limitations in any society or civilization. Internal and external factors on one hand and other people's selfishness on the other can make any individual in the society selfish.

In a man-oriented civilization, efforts must be made in order to limit unconditional, general principles like selfishness inside logical limits, in favor of man. For example, education and management in the society should be in a way that people's selfishness can be moderated without the fatalistic influence of punishment or trapping people in the chains of a mechanically rigid life.

2– The unconditional principle of economy also should be accompanied by principles that uproot poverty in the society. In fact the absolute dominance of the economy – a general, unconditional principle – must be moderated in order to fulfill the financial needs of all members of the society; as a conditional principle that can guarantee the survival of a civilization.

3– Freedom is an extremely important phenomenon without which no man-oriented civilization can become true. Unlimited, un-moderated freedom will lead to the end of mankind, so freedom should turn into free will to supervise man's deeds. Freedom-seeking, therefore, is a general, unconditional principle

that should be conditioned by righteousness and perfectionism.

4– The principle that claims stagnancy can bring about the fall of a civilization becomes true when its people and also social leaders lose their sense of perfectionism; despite internal and external pressures, civilizations do not fall unless their fundamentals fade away. If a civilization enjoys doubtless, internally dynamic bases – in other words, if it is man-oriented and its people actively preserve it – the civilization would never disappear. External factors cannot cause anything further than temporary stagnancy.

5– The fifth unconditional principle, the law of causality, can become unconditional by means of the knowledge and needs of the people making the civilization. Man's awareness, power and wishes concerning the problems of a civilization greatly influence its survival or fall.

The Relationships between Civilizations

The question whether civilizations are related has always been a part of discussions about them. Do civilizations influence each other? There are three theories about it:

- a) All civilizations are related and mutually influence each other.
- b) No civilization can influence another, for civilizations are too far apart both in time and distance.
- c) The relationships among civilizations can be neither totally defied nor proved. Studies on civilizations reveal some points in common between them, but none of them mean that one of them can be the origin of another. We must keep in mind that:

1– Commonalities observed among people in senses, thoughts, imagination and original wishes concerning life and its ideal quality can lead to commonalities between civilizations.

Apart from environmental conditions that can prepare the grounds for a civilization to come into being, the other important factors that can bring about the rise of a civilization are geniuses who possess positive thoughts and efforts and also the issue of vital needs that lead to increases in man's knowledge and his relationship with nature.

2– There should be a distinction between original civilizations and those that are imitational; such a distinction exists for cultures. Civilizations like Islam and the Byzantine are original, and have not been influenced by any other civilization. They arose from inside their societies themselves.

3– The physical effects of civilizations, like economic luxury and legal security, should be distinguished from man's spiritual development and glory, for if the latter is not regarded as the path to achieve an intelligible life – the main goal of a civilization – it would never be an original civilization, no matter how luxurious its people may be.

In a man-oriented civilization, man is sacrificed to the benefit of the tools and devices he himself has

built. An obvious example is the Western civilization, made by man but alas heading for the destruction of mankind. The West has presented thirty Articles on the Human Rights, but it has presented nothing on how to be human and what an intelligible life includes.

Now that we have proved that physical effects of progress in human relationship with nature and the unfolding of various human aspects in a purely natural environment are different from man-oriented civilizations, we can conclude that even if human civilizations influence each other, this cannot be true in the case of man-oriented civilizations, for no civilization can command another to be man-oriented.

Without thought, freedom and determination to achieve intelligible life, becoming man-oriented is impossible. Relationships among civilizations are similar to the relationship between two people – one at the peak of human development and perfection, the other the contrary. If the person spiritually developed intends to have a positive influence on the other one, mere relationship would not be enough; the deprived person should intelligently and freely determine to make progress.

The Holy Qur'an has also pointed this out in various ways, for example:

تلك أمة قد خلت لها ما كسبت و لكم ما كسبتم

“That is a nation that has passed away; there awaits them what they have earned, and there awaits you what you have earned.” (2: 134)

In brief, civilizations can have mutual influence to physical extent, but cannot imitate each other from a man-oriented point of view. A man-oriented civilization can present its positive experiences, principles and laws, such as fair behavior toward each other, intelligible freedom, sound economy, dominant human virtues and morals, etc.

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