

# Why Muslims Should Learn Western Civilization

Spahic Omer

It is obvious that Western civilization is on the decline. It is losing its creativity penchant and a sense of beauty as well as direction. It is rapidly becoming an obsessive agnostic, immoral and ungodly freak.

Optimism and confidence are fading fast. Less and less ingenuity and answers are in the offing, making it a junk civilization that lacks substance. The decline may soon turn into a free fall.

Indeed, there is more to life and happiness than sheer matter and material progress. Unfortunately, most people learn the truth only when it is too late.

The problem however is that Western civilization imposed itself as a global phenomenon. It did so mainly by force, through the channels of colonization, imperialism and globalization, which, in essence, is synonymous with westernization.

Western civilization is purported to be an ultimate civilization, denoting the end of man's sociocultural, political and economic evolution. It should be the "end of history".

Therefore, its proselytizing appetite, whereby the gospels of westernization and modernization are most earnestly preached, is unprecedented. The world needs to be evangelized in the name of Western values and standards.

The Western civilizational outlook signifies the bona fide saviour of mankind, i.e., the messiah. There ought to be no deity except for the deity of Western humanism and materialism.

## **Towards an Islamic resurgence**

In parallel with all this, there are signs of a widespread Islamic resurgence. Even though they are few, hazy and disjointed, the signs are there and increasing nevertheless. The ultimate objective is a total Islamic civilizational renaissance.

By the way, Islamic civilization never ceased to exist. It only went – was sent - into a hibernation state. It cannot expire, for its soul is everlasting. The presence of the truth it seeks to enliven and exemplify is overarching. It needs but rethinking and recalibrating.

The resurgence is expected to pick up the pace proportionally to the decline of Western civilization. That is the case because of some fundamental principles that govern the rise and fall of civilizations, and because Islam is the only remaining capacity that can take up the baton.

There is no other all-encompassing system of thought and practice left in the world that can lay claims to being able to do so. The world is tired of claimants and pretenders. The necropolis of history is full of them.

That Islam is the only hope left is a nightmare prospect for right-wing extremists, ultranationalists and all other anti-Islam activists worldwide. That explains the current unfathomable hullabaloo about Islam and Muslims. It is likewise the root cause of the recent dramatic rise and diversification of Islamophobia.

As a consequence, Muslims pay more and more attention to the matters of Islamic values, history and civilization as the prerequisites of an Islamic renaissance. Which is commendable and should be supported by all means, especially in the field of education with all its dimensions and levels.

Certainly, there is no Islamic civilization without authentic Islamic thought and intellectualism. And there cannot be Islamic civilizational independence without the total independence of education and thought. Freedom, thought and education constitute a civilizational “trinity”.

### **The importance of learning Western civilization**

There is something else, though.

For Muslims to learn Western civilization is as critical as learning Islamic civilization. Both are indispensable for a proper Muslim awakening.

If Emanuel Kant said that the key to the Western Enlightenment was to have the courage to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of anyone else, the key to a contemporary Islamic enlightenment would be to have the courage to use one’s own understanding but with the guidance of the eternal spirit of Islamic civilization and the guidance of the failing spirit of its Western counterpart.

The former teaches what is to be done and why, and the latter what is not to be done and why. The wisdom derived from both paradigms should be used as a platform for independently knowing how, when and where things are to be done within the context of the contemporary Islamic civilization-building enterprise.

Exactly this sentiment Seyyed Hossein Nasr had in mind when he composed a book titled “A Young Muslim’s Guide to the Modern World”.

In the book, he urges above all young Muslims who stand at a crossroads “to become familiar with their religion and to gain an understanding of the modern world from the Islamic point of view in order to respond to its challenges.”

The same attitude saturates the philosophy of “Islamization of knowledge”.

It should be pointed out that Seyyed Hossein Nasr regularly emphasizes that one of the serious problems of Muslims nowadays is their lack of knowledge concerning Western civilization in general and its philosophical foundations in particular. That renders them undue idealists and romantics, as opposed to being due realists.

### **Western civilization as a core academic subject**

Thus, along with the subject of Islamic civilization, a core academic subject – or even subjects in certain academic programs - on Western civilization should in addition be taught

in all Muslim institutions of higher learning. All Muslim students, regardless of their academic specializations, should complete the subject.

The subject should be comprehensive and multidimensional. The teachers should be extremely competent and open-minded, bearing in mind the delicate nature of the problems the subject needs to address.

The subject should be taught concurrently with the subject of Islamic civilization. The focus should be on the ideological components of Western civilization, its thought, evolution and interactions with, and impact on, Muslims and the Islamic world.

The subject's motto should be "Have the audacity to question and know".

This will inevitably add to the burden of students. However, the fact remains that there are no shortcuts to excellence. Achieving it and staying on top requires going the extra mile and doing beyond what is necessary. The purpose of education is not to produce one-dimensional professionals, but holistic good men and women capable of confronting life challenges head-on.

Western civilization is not to be approached with a worship-like attitude. Instead of glorifying it, it should be approached like a sick person who needs a right diagnosis and treatment. It furthermore should be perceived along the lines of a great many failed civilizational experiments in history.

All that without undervaluing even in the slightest whatever good Western civilization has contributed to mankind. Credit must be given where credit is due.

By way of illustration, Muslims should deal with the theme of colonization from their own perspectives as the colonized victims, rather than the perspectives of the colonizers; World War I and World War II – and their countless civilizational implications – should be studied primarily from the perspectives of Muslims, rather than the perspectives of either the Allies or Axis powers; the emergence of the European Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment (or Reason), the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions – as precursors of Modernity and Post-Modernity – should be studied against the background of the powerful presence – albeit rapidly waning in subsequent ages - of Islamic civilization as a direct and indirect influencer of the rise of Western civilization; and since Western civilization is intrinsically at odds with Heaven, spirituality and morality, its especially deceptive aspects are to be continuously weighed against the revealed worldview and teachings of Islam.

After emphasizing that a mandatory study of Islamic civilization is an important aspect of the possible antidote to the prevalent de-Islamization processes, Isma'il al-Faruqi said about the importance of learning Western civilization (principally its sciences and thought) and Islamizing its problematic dimensions: "Today, Muslim youth are being westernized by Muslim teachers in Muslim universities. This situation must be changed immediately. There can be no doubt that Muslim academicians must master all the modern disciplines in order to understand them completely and to achieve an absolute command of all that they have to offer. This is the first prerequisite. Then, they must integrate the new knowledge into the corpus of the Islamic legacy by eliminating, amending, reinterpreting, and adapting its components as the world-view of Islam and its values dictate."

It is hoped that the people of authority and decision makers in general will think more seriously about this proposition. Similarly it is hoped that soon they will start behaving more responsibly towards the interests of Islam and Muslims. Such however is not a choice, but a duty. Doing so is what they have been entrusted with.

The benefits of learning Western civilization could be summarized as follows.

### ***First***

It will help Muslims diagnose and treat better their present situation, and will help them chart independently their future civilizational courses. What is happening now is essentially the result of the past. And the Muslim past was woven as much by internal as external (predominantly Western) factors and undercurrents.

### ***Second***

It will help Muslims attain what they have been craving and fighting for for ages: true independence and freedom. Their Muslim and national consciousness will improve, and so will their patriotism and self-esteem. That in turn will lead to the forging of genuine religious, cultural and national identities. Muslims will finally be themselves, living for themselves and serving their own interests, rather than pretending to be someone else and serving the interests of others.

### ***Third***

Doing so will help Muslims cope with the overwhelming challenges associated with modernity and post-modernity. Those challenges may target exclusively Muslims, or the wellbeing of the whole world. Instead of being mere observers, they as a community (*ummah*) could then grow to be active participants. They could become global assets. Instead of only taking from the world (being chiefly a consuming community), they could start giving to the world, making it a better place. As a moderate nation (*ummatan wasatan*) and the holders of the truth, Muslims are duty-bound to do so. If they as the vicegerents of earth fail to shine in the milieus of darkneses, they will be held responsible on the Day of Judgment for the existential let-down.

### ***Fourth***

That will make Muslims more broad-minded, progressive and unprejudiced. They will be richer and more enlightened. They will know where the truth, and where falsehood, lies. As a result, they will be champions of tolerance, integration, coexistence and dialogue initiatives not just in their own midst, but also elsewhere. Western civilization is an important “volume” of the “encyclopaedia” of history where the will and plan of Almighty Allah as the Creator and Sustainer of life unfolded. That volume - like all other volumes and chapters - is replete with meanings, signs (*ayat*) and lessons (*‘ibar*), which the faithful, generally, have been commanded to meticulously study, reflect on and apply. The mistakes of the past must not be repeated. The Prophet (pbuh) said that wisdom is the lost property of the believer. Wherever he finds it, he is most deserving of it (and let him claim it) (al-Tirmidhi).

### ***Fifth***

The Qur’an is the ultimate source of history and civilizational awareness. It looks as much to the present and the future, as to the past. While it aims to analyse the present, providing

answers for it and paving the way for the future, it also, in equal measure, amends and remedies the past. A historical dimension is one of the many dimensions of the Qur'an as the permanent miracle (*mu'jizah*). Hence, Muslims are bidden to use the Qur'anic treasure as the criterion (*furqan*) while dealing with ensuing historical phases and civilizational stories, including the story of Western civilization. Not only that it cannot be overlooked, but also Western civilization must be dealt with painstakingly, subjecting it to the values and standards of the Qur'anic divine message. People need and deserve answers. Thus, Muslims are indirectly mandated by their Qur'an to dissect the truth about the West and its civilization and to disseminate it to the world. Western civilization is a compelling and all-pervading reality, and it should be treated as such.

### ***Sixth***

Muslims will be more pragmatic and sensible. Fanaticism, deliberate mediocrity and sedating formalism will find virtually all avenues to the Muslim mind – and soul - blocked. Muslims will understand Islam and their own history and civilization better, as nothing operates in a vacuum. Problems are people's constructs that do not recognize enacted boundaries, and so must be solutions. The laws of the rise and fall of civilizations – comprising Islamic civilization too - will make more sense to Muslims, inspiring them into action. They will become a more responsible and more insightful lot. Most importantly, they will become better Muslims and will appreciate better who they are and what they have.

### ***Seventh***

Finally, the story of Islamic culture and civilization during the last couple of centuries was largely one of close interactions with the West and its civilization. Consequently, the West was either excessively venerated or excessively despised and hated. Learning objectively Western civilization today will eventually guide Muslims to a middle – and true – civilizational path. The principle of *la tafrit wa la ifrat* (neither negligence nor immoderation) ought to be the yardstick.