



10-1-2006

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Recommended Citation

Snyder, Lee Daniel (2006) "Comparing Civilizations 2005 Presidential Address," *Comparative Civilizations Review*. Vol. 55 : No. 55 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol55/iss55/4>

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COMPARING CIVILIZATIONS 2005 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

LEE DANIEL SNYDER

Some recent questions raised by Ricardo Deschesne about our criteria for nominations to the Quigley Prize suggested to me that it might be time to clarify our Society's identity. This is obviously a tricky and controversial issue for a multidisciplinary and diverse Society like our own. Nevertheless as a new president, admittedly elected with no opposition, I think it is appropriate for me to explain my understanding, and indeed my conviction, about how our society should define itself in distinction with many other parallel societies, like the World History Society.

I see us as heirs of the tradition started by Spengler, and continued by Sorokin, Toynbee, Quigley, Melko and others. This tradition assumes that there are many distinctly different Civilizations in the history of the world and not one grand civilization of humanity. And so the plural "Civilizations" in our title. This should warn us against intellectual imperialism, Orientalism, and the common conviction that all successful civilizations have, that they are the greatest and best society that ever existed and the climax of history. And this is a very popular attitude in contemporary America, as we all know. In my view, we are committed to multiculturalism, not a superficial blending of all civilizations. We can argue about this later!

We also have another key word in our title, namely "comparative." To me this means that the distinctive characteristics of a civilization must be determined by a careful contrast with some other civilization or civilizations. Are we doing enough of this? Can we really compare if we are largely immersed in the present world and its future, regardless of how important that process may be? How indeed do we compare? If there is only one civilization of humanity, there is no basis for comparison. More about this later. I might add that a third characteristic of our Society is vigorous debate! I hope my remarks encourage that also.

We have many different definitions of civilization in our Society, I know, so agreements will continue to be difficult, but as for me, I see three interdependent systems active in every civilization, an economic system, a political system, and a cultural system. The sharing of technology and trade between civilizations is usually relatively easy and extensive, as recent scholarship has emphasized, so for me this means

that economic comparisons should be the least interesting and significant for defining the distinctiveness of a tradition. They are based on a universal desire for profits and competitive advantage.

A comparison of political institutions tell us a lot more about basic civilizational differences, but again, the basic necessities of maintaining order and security, controlling a population, and fighting wars, rest on similar strategies. Some borrowing and sharing is advantageous. But the cultural system embodies the uniqueness of the society, the core of its tradition, where borrowing is most difficult and resistance to the alien is most fiercely maintained. Growing and vital civilizations fight to recover and sustain their uniqueness, though weakened and demoralized civilizations can even disappear and be absorbed by more vigorous competitors.

Looking around the world today, in my view, we can see the Islamic world fighting to recover its uniqueness, though the battle against absorption by the West has not yet been won. China has been perhaps the most successful in controlling its uniqueness at the political level, with an associated ideology, and thereby freely borrowing technology and trade without disruption. After a recent month touring, and thus, of course, a four-week expert, India seems to me still on the fence, with pride in its unique heritage but fascinated by the wealth and glamour of the West.

At a more analytical level, I would argue that civilizations flourish because they have discovered mechanisms to enable a large, and sometimes even a vast population of strangers to cooperate *voluntarily* in a complex interacting system; not all participants, of course, but if there is too much non-cooperation, the result is civil war. Economic prosperity helps, but in the end competition for wealth and resources undermines cooperation. A strong force is needed to check this force of disruption. Up to a point, the political system provides that force, but many civilizations have state systems that also threaten cooperation and promote conflict. For me, no civilization grows and expands unless it has a powerful cultural system able to control the competitiveness of economics and the coercion of politics, and is able to persuade the majority to cooperate freely with others because they share the same values and sense of identity. Otherwise the civilization weakens and disintegrates. This is why, for me, the study and comparison of cultural systems is the most important and interesting part of historical analysis and civilizational studies.

The free acceptance of cultural values depends upon establishing

some transcendent principle that elevates them above economic competition and political coercion, one that establishes a reliable sense of justice. In my analysis there are only three such principles that can do this, scientific truth, loyalty to some noble community, or obedience to a transcendent god or gods. Beginning civilizations are usually not ready for science (it is non-existent or too elitist), and loyalty to a noble community is difficult when institutions are weak and charismatic leadership unreliable. This means that religion is usually the mechanism that enables civilizations to grow in their early stages. Only religion has the power to unite diversity because all humans are called equally to obedience. For me, this is why the Middle East has been turning to religion for reconstruction. This is why the communist party in China acts like a religious priesthood and is vital to its development. Thus for me, Toynbee was right, that religion is central to defining civilizations, not economic prosperity or military power.

How then do we study civilizations? We do so by first of all, careful historical analysis over long periods of time, because we can not study the future without wishful thinking. Secondly we use a comparative method, because immersion in only one civilization distorts our objectivity and provides no outside point of reference. But how do we make persuasive comparisons? How do we avoid the inappropriate comparisons, like the traditional comparison of "apples with oranges?"

While most historians implicitly compare the past with the present, and must do so to reach students, these comparisons are always problematic, since history is a stream of unique and unrepeatable events. Such comparisons always have hidden and sometimes unexamined assumptions about underlying structural patterns that do not change. Comparing contemporary periods between civilizations can reveal interesting information about their participation in a world-wide economic network and an analysis of why some powers are winning wars and some are not, but if the civilizations are at different stages of development, can such comparisons tell us anything about cultural creativity and crisis management? They tell us about external relationships, about strengths and weaknesses against other civilizations, but do they tell us about internal processes and uniqueness?

If the comparisons of contemporary stages among civilizations are limited in potential, what is the alternative? Obviously the comparison of civilizations at the *same* stage of development. In my view we need to compare civilizations in their first period of development, in their greatest stages of creativity, and in their final stages of decline, whether

contemporary or not. But unless we can agree on the periodization of the various civilizations, this remains a problematic research agenda. Is it proper for instance to compare the 10th-11th Century CE revival of Shi'ism in Islamic Civilization with the Renaissance-Reformation period in Western Europe during the 15th and 16th Centuries? On the surface, it seems strange, yet those of you who have studied my book will remember that I suggested that comparison as not only appropriate but of great value for understanding the dynamic of civilizations.

We can also compare two civilizations as wholes, but this depends upon some agreement about beginnings and endings, and requires an immense amount of learning about the history and character of two major entities, when mastering even one is a difficult challenge. Making defensible generalizations for me is the greatest challenge facing all historians and those dependent on historical scholarship.

I was confronted with this issue recently when I offered to teach a course on "Islam the Other Western Civilization" for a local senior academy, and I was confronted with the problem of defining the West. Obviously the difference between the East and the West is a tricky and long standing problem. Herodotus and the Greeks saw Persia as the East and thus the alien. Medieval Europeans saw Byzantium as the East and thus the alien. Recent "Orientalists" saw the Middle East, India, China, and Japan as the East and thus alien and somehow inferior to the "modern" West, namely Europe.

Today we can make a different judgment, not based upon the perceptions of the alien, but on the assumptions that there are a variety of civilizations in the world with distinctly different traditions, but still related to one another in various ways by a partially shared history. My Macro-Macro chart suggests a division between East and West at a different but significant point. That is, in the Third Era of my periodization, East and West are different because they are based on different fundamental assumptions about human purpose and capabilities. Incidentally, in my Second Era, I would argue that the best distinction between groups of civilizations should be between North and South, not East and West.

For my new students, I made up a summary of characteristics, with those sweeping generalizations that I warned you all were problematic and controversial, yet here they are:

ISLAM, THE OTHER WESTERN CIVILIZATION

Differences Between Modern East and West:

- West:** Dominated by assumption of one all-powerful god and judge
Saved by God, by obeying God's Law and by God's compassion (love)
Dominating human problem: Conquering fear
- East:** Dominated by assumption that each individual must save himself (gods many and weak)
Saved by advancing up a spiritual ladder, by discipline and wisdom
Dominating human problem: Conquering desire

The Three Western Sisters:

- West 1: Byzantine Civilization**, formed between c.300-650 CE
Greek Christianity, Secular Classical (Greek) learning, and Roman imperial government
- West 2: Islamic Civilization**, formed between c.600-900 CE
Islamic Monotheism, Secular Greek learning, and Persian governmental tradition
- West 3: Western European Civilization**, formed c.700-1000 CE
Latin Christianity, Secular Roman-Greek learning, and German feudal government

The Three Eastern Brothers:

- East 1: Modern Chinese Civilization**, formed c.550-900 CE
Mahayana Buddhism, Secular Chinese learning, and Chinese Imperial government
- East 2: South Indian Civilization**, formed c.550-900 CE
Hindu Revival, Secular Indian learning, and Cooperative Caste government
- East 3: Japanese Civilization**, formed c.850-1200
Mahayana Buddhism, Secular Chinese learning, and Aristocratic military government

I am sure most of you will agree that these generalizations are con-

troversial, and could be the subject of a panel discussion, but they do seem to me to make some interesting and useful distinctions about variations among unique civilizations. Clearly I have suggested that Biblical religion has been a dominating force in all three “Western” civilizations, that these civilizations can be considered “sisters” after an obscure prophecy in Ezekiel. We may want to call the West European tradition a sister to the Byzantine, Latin and Greek Christianity, and treat Islam as a cousin. But this analysis, if it stands up, suggests a much different attitude about Islamic Civilization, a greater degree of understanding, without compromising its uniqueness.

So much of our attention today points to the present or the future, the power of “globalization” and the threatening ecological crises, but we can not really study the future. It is speculation that may or may not materialize. But we can study the past, and see the richness of history, the power of human creativity, the successes and failures, yes, and the collapse of civilizations. Some civilizations have disappeared; some have been absorbed by more successful and dynamic centers. Some areas have made surprising revivals, like the reemergence of Persia after the Alexandrian conquest.

I discovered one surprise in a study that I presented to this Society in 1991 which I called “The First 600 Years.” It was a step-by-step comparison of the rise of Christianity with the rise of Islam. It concluded that there was a remarkable parallel between the step-by-step maturing of the religious communities, climaxing with the similar roles of St. Augustine and Al-Ghazali in synthesizing the traditions, even though the religions had vastly different relationships with their surrounding “civilizations.” Christianity was shaped by three centuries of persecution by a hostile Roman Empire, while Islam almost immediately became a major force shaping the rise of a new empire, the Caliphate. This suggests that major religions may have an inherent pattern of maturing, whether or not they were rejected or embraced by their cultural environment. This is another kind of suggestive comparative study, but we will leave that to a future discussion.