Civilization: A Definition Part I. Identifying Individual Civilizations

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In 1952 the anthropologists A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn published their survey *Culture*, in which they found that scholars use the word essentially interchangeably with “civilization” and have proposed 164 distinct major definitions of these words (with a footnote that, counting details, the sum was probably closer to 300) [Kroeber and Kluckhohn n.d.: 25, 291]. We of the ISCSC have probably added at least some dozen more definitions of “civilization” since then. This essay will build on a series of articles published in this journal [Hord 1981, 1987a, 1987b, 1989] to propose yet another.

Hord (1981) was a discussion of the nature of the beginning of civilization. It referred among other examples to a North American archaeological assemblage called the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex or Southern Cult, which has been the subject of very hot argument ever since it was first proposed to be a legitimate assemblage. James Brown has complained that the applications of this particular label have become so general that one “could single out from the Southern Cult laundry list [of associations] a symbolic system, the trappings and accoutrements of states, a cosmology, trade networks, ritual life, art style, and even a technology” [Brown 1975:3]. The culture at issue, the Mississippians, ca. AD 1200, was only Neolithic; it had polished stone tools, pottery, and grain agriculture, but no cities (with one possible exception), writing, or metallurgy beyond beaten raw copper. Nevertheless it is hereby proposed to have been civilized, because it is further proposed that, in the very nature of his complaint, Brown was defining civilization. Consider for example medieval Europe: If an archaeologist were excavating the culture built around the Roman Catholic Church, would he also find “a symbolic system, the trappings and accoutrements of states, a cosmology, trade networks, ritual life, art style, and even a technology”? In our own
times, specifically in the modern socialist states, does Marxism-Leninism also include “a symbolic system, the trappings and accoutrements of states, a cosmology [even, in one well-known episode, its own Lysenkoist biology], trade networks, ritual life, art style, and even a technology”? Thus it would seem that the existence of these collectivities of associations has a very great time depth, from the archaeological assemblages of Neolithic prehistory through the Middle Ages into modern times.

But these are only assemblages. They purport that certain items are associated, but it is very difficult to determine the nature and extent of the association. Nevertheless it has already been proposed by Gordon Willey that, in the beginnings of civilization in Mesoamerica and Peru, these assemblages reflect a genuine integration of the mental worlds associated with them:

The great styles . . . Olmec [of Mesoamerica, ca. 1250-400 BC] and Chavin [of Peru, ca. 1500-200 BC] . . . are but the symbols of the religious ideologies of the early farming societies of Mesoamerica and Peru. I would further suggest that in these ideologies these early societies had developed a mechanism of intercommunication, a way of knitting together the smaller parts of the social universe of their day into a more unified whole than it had heretofore been or would otherwise be. In a way similar to that of the exchange of objects, plants, and techniques which had previously prepared the village agricultural threshold, the sharing of common ideologies led to the threshold of civilization by enlarging the social field. By this enlargement more individuals, more social segments, more local societies combined and coordinated their energies than at any time before. [Willey 1962:9-10]

Once the evidence of history is available, not just association but system becomes obvious. Consider, the situation in the Mediterranean area at the beginning of history, as reflected in a discussion of protohistoric kingship:

If we refer to kingship as a political institution, we assume a point of view which would have been incomprehensible to the ancients. We imply that the human polity can be considered by itself. The ancients, however, experienced life as part of a widely spreading network of communications which reached beyond the local and the national into the hidden depths of nature and the powers that rule nature. The purely secular—insofar as it could be granted to exist at all—was the purely trivial. Whatever was significant was embedded in the life of the cosmos, and it was precisely the king’s function to maintain the harmony of that integration. This doctrine is valid for the whole of the ancient Near East and for many other regions. [Frankfort 1948:3]
Here again the same applies to medieval Catholicism and modern Marxism-Leninism: Both are, much more than mere collections of associations, ideologized integrations of their entire worlds. One may say the same of Greek and Russian Orthodoxy, of Islam and Judaism and Zoroastrianism, of Taoism and the various schools of Buddhism and Hinduism. These religions are not just theologies: they are detailed and systematized understandings of their worlds from each separate religious point of view. For purposes of this paper, the word religion will henceforth refer solely to such universal religions as Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Taoism, thus not so much to theologies as to interpretations of the universe that happen to have a theology as a central element. This introduces certain problems that will be dealt with later; for the moment, when the word religion is used the reader should think automatically of one of these medieval-type churches.

Everyone admits these religions to have been important, even central, in their various civilizations. But this paper proposes them to be not merely central but defining; each individual civilization would not have existed without its systematized core set of beliefs. In most cases this is a very difficult proposition to prove. A theorist may hypothesize what the civilization would have been like without the religion, but this can never be more than a hypothesis. This is because, by the very nature of their claims to universality, although these religions have identifiable core beliefs they usually have at best only very vague boundaries. One may talk theoretically about subtracting the religion from the rest of the culture, but no agreement would be reached as to the extent of this subtraction. Medieval-type religions exist in so deep a symbiosis with their associated cultures that while certain basic items—crops, plows, bricks, swords, even villages—would exist without the religion, one must wonder whether the civilization’s appreciation and treatment of them would still be essentially the same.

This problem may be resolved by addressing it from the opposite viewpoint, by looking not from the top down but from the bottom up. Consider the interpretation and handling of a single familiar event, for example the common headache, across different civilizations. This is now commonly treated as a physical problem, to be dealt with by such physical means as the aspirin tablet.
But behind this aspirin is a whole set of what is nowadays called “doctor-patient relationships,” such that not only the doctor but also the patient has a great deal of indoctrinated background in what to expect. Thus even in our own physical-scientific civilization no doctor would admit that even so physical a problem as headaches could have a complete study that was limited just to its physical aspects. Even to suggest the possibility would make the thoroughly ethnocentric\(^1\) assumption that medical treatment is a purely physical field of study. In most civilizations, nothing to do with medicine was ever considered “purely physical.” Indeed the basic import of the Frankfort quotation above is that the civilizations referred to would never have admitted that anything beyond the “purely trivial” could be “purely physical” at all; the word “physical” itself is in its modern understanding the product of our own modern scientific culture. Therefore this paper will contend that to ask what a culture would be like without its associated religion is tantamount to asking what Catholicism would be like without Christianity; the association is so intimate that, insofar as the integrated civilization is concerned, the subtraction leaves no coherent remainder, but only fragments contributed from sometimes quite different sources. The members of a civilization would not admit, could not even conceive, of its existing without its core beliefs, and students of that civilization should not do so either.

The proposal that medieval-type religions define their civilizations may be an interesting hypothesis, but if in fact the boundaries of such religions are always so vague, then such a hypothesis must be very hard to test. However, there have been some situations in which a religion has been a specific, bounded and definable entity, subject to relatively straightforward analysis. This occurs whenever the religion is picked up and moved bodily from its initial set of believers to a new people, when it is limited to those few concepts that can metaphorically be packed in the priests’ knapsacks and survive among a people not born and raised to them. All missionary work is an attempt at this process. Consider the specific case of Kievan Russia, which at one moment was not a member state of the Greek Orthodox Church, and at the next moment was. This change had various effects, and the Russians themselves were well aware of these effects:
The conversion to Christianity was not a purely religious event: Christianity, for Russia, meant at that time a higher civilization. In the eyes of the Russians themselves the conversion to Christianity made them part of the civilized world. . . . Vladimir’s motives in his conversion may have been predominantly political. Once baptized, however, he accepted the new faith with all possible responsibility. [Vernadsky 1948:69-71]

However doubtful one may be of the spiritual significance of Christianity in Kievan Russia—for the mass of the population, Christian ritual was evidently but a thin veneer on pagan superstition, while the rulers honored Christian precepts mainly in the breach—there can be no question of the immense cultural influence of the Church. On the material side, Russian architecture was profoundly influenced by Byzantine models; the arts and crafts, largely in the service of the Church, flourished in Kievan Rus after the conversion. In the realm of government, the canon law provided precedents for developing the legislative activity of the Kievan princes. . . . Education, of course, was monopolized by the Church. . . . A few of the leading sons of ruling families even studied at Constantinople. [Clarkson 1961:35]

Likewise in other civilizations, early Japanese Buddhism is remarked as “a vehicle of high learning [as well as] the professed faith of the Court and nobility” [Samson 1958:120-121]. It is always remarked that the rulers of these “early states,” to use the anthropological term, wanted these churches principally as an ideological support for their own newly-founded rule, but each imported church became far more than that. The positions of imported Vajrayana Buddhism in Yarlung Tibet, Theravada Buddhism in Pagan Burma, and Saiva Hinduism in the Khmer Empire are three more examples proposed to be of this same class; they were initially supported by rulers of new states as instruments of integration, and came to be the ideological centers of each society.

It is next important that this emphasis on religion is not characteristic only of new states borrowing instruments of integration from older ones. The medieval Mediterranean world had a long and distinguished history of civilization at the time of the disintegration of the Roman Empire, an event usually taken to mark the end of Classical civilization and the beginning of the Middle Ages. Hord (1987b) studied this type of period, and fixed the transitions between civilizations to specific times, for example that between Classical and Byzantine civilization to the reign of Justinian (527-565), between Classical and Western civilization to the joint
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reign of the sons of Clovis (511-561). The following quotations were among those used in illustration:

The epoch of Justinian doubtless bore many marks of late antiquity but it also showed many signs of the new Byzantine civilization that was coming into being. The age of Justinian is essentially the time of transition from the world of late antiquity to that of Byzantium. [Haussig 1971:75]

The first question that has to be considered in laying down the plan of [the Cambridge] Medieval History is, Where to begin? Where shall we draw the line that separates it from Ancient History? . . . [He notes various traditional dates, such as the deposition of the last Western Roman Emperor in 476.] We should do better . . . by dividing in the middle of the Gothic War (535-553). . . . The Rome which Belisarius delivered [in 536] was still the Rome of the Caesars, while the Rome which Narses entered sixteen years later [552] is already the Rome of the popes. It is the same in Gaul. The remains of the old civilisation still found under the sons of Clovis are mostly obliterated in the next generation. Procopius [ca. 500-ca. 560] witnessed as great a revolution as did Polybius [historian of the Roman conquest of the Mediterranean, second century BC]. [Gwatkin 1924:1,1]

This is the period commonly called the Dark Ages, a term favored by historians disgusted at the lack of written evidence from which to write papers, but quite adequate even on that basis. The Dark Ages are usually thought of in terms of Europe, but they applied in post-Roman Byzantium as well, which had its own period that Byzantinists call the “Byzantine Dark Ages” (approximately AD 600-800). Private schools disappeared; education declined and became a province of the Church [Runciman 1956:180-181]; a foundation of 843 is noted as “the first Byzantine school since the early seventh century to have more than one instructor [four] and to offer a formal program of what may be called higher education” [Treadgold 1984:87]. Consider for example one book from that period:

It would be natural to see the impetus for [this book] . . . in the all too evident decline of the late antique city and the desire to record and explain what remained, for the Forum of Constantine, for example, had already become a focus of myth and legend, and the Hippodrome a scene of enigmatic decoration and strange statues. We shall see below that [the book’s] contributors belong very much to the intellectual milieu of eighth-century Constantinople, when books were few and scholarship difficult. Had they done their work in the tenth century, after the work of Constantine Porphyrogenitus had made many texts available once again,
their achievement might have looked very different. As it was, they were ill-equipped for their task, and had to depend all too often on ill-informed oral information or hearsay, perhaps often little more than mere gossip. Surviving late antique inscriptions were a mystery to them, and for much of their subject matter they seem to have had no written material to start from. Yet these men were probably as well educated as any, for laymen of the period. [Cameron and Herrin 1984:27-29]

But Byzantium preserved the ancient learning quite well as compared to Europe. In Europe there was not only a considerable loss of material but also a change in the very nature of learning. This occurred at approximately the same time as the proposed transition between civilizations cited above.

But though he [Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus, c. 490- c. 585] had a real enthusiasm for learning, it must not be imagined that he was a classical writer himself. On the contrary, he was a most admirable example of the fact that the pattern of men’s thought had changed.... In his attitude toward knowledge, which again was profoundly medieval, Cassiodorus caught something of this same infection. If the distinguishing mark of the learned was that they read books, it would seem to follow that learning to be had in books was sounder than any knowledge that might be gathered by personal observation. He stated in all seriousness that the elephant had no knees, that once prostrate upon the ground it could not rise unaided, that it paid homage to good rulers but not to bad, and that ‘when requested to do so, it exhales its breath, which is said to be a remedy for the headache.’ If challenged as to the truth of these statements he would probably have replied that they were certainly true because he had read them in a book; and if by any chance he had subsequently seen an elephant he would probably have said that it was not a ‘real’ elephant, since ‘real’ elephants had no knees. This uncritical adoration of book-learning was one of the most significant features of the so-called ‘Dark Ages.’ There is a popular fallacy that the cause of the Dark Ages was the fact that the barbarians destroyed the civilization which they found, burning cities, breaking statues, and casting works of classical authors into the flames. In point of fact, the men who ushered in the Dark Ages were men like Theodoric and Cassiodorus, who were intent on restoring the cities, preserving the statues, and transcribing the classics. Their adoration of the ancient world was matched only by their inability to understand it, for by the time that they were born, classical culture was already dead. They were the first of the great medievals and began to build a new civilization in an attempt to restore the old. [Davis 1970:52]

This proposed transition from one civilization to the next is even more marked regarding another kind of knowledge. Medieval scholars worked hard to restore the ancient learning, but with a great difference. The medieval emphasis was on a
source of knowledge that the Classical world, until its last years, had treated only with contempt: those same religions discussed above as the cores of the new civilizations. It is at the beginning of these new civilizations that this emphasis becomes visible.

If we say that Justinian I was more of a Roman than of a Christian emperor, the statement requires several qualifications. But it nonetheless embodies a profound truth. Justinian I was in thought far more akin to Constantine the Great, or for that matter, to Augustus Caesar, than to Heraclius [610-641], who was so much closer to him in time. Would it be going too far to suggest that the Christian religion was to Justinian scarcely more than a prop or adjunct of Roman imperialism and unification, whereas to Heraclius and his successors it was the inspiration, the justification, the very marrow of that concept? [Jenkins 1969:379]

But it was not only the self-consciously post-Roman Byzantines who chose to emphasize Christianity. When eventually the post-German West began to cohere, it made the same choice.

Charlemagne's conception of the function of a ruler was basically primitive. This should not be taken in a derogatory sense. It simply means that Charlemagne saw himself as a tribal chieftain and, since he was a Christian, he derived much of his knowledge of human affairs from the Bible. . . . [He saw] himself as a new David. He was the anointed of the Lord who held power over his tribesmen under God, and they owed obedience to him because he was to them what God was to all creatures. . . . In order to promote unity, stability, and hierarchy, Charlemagne and his scholar friends threw their whole weight behind the propagation of the Christian religion. . . . They all thought that the Christian religion they were so earnestly preaching and promoting was a tribal religion and that its chief merit was to define the membership and the limits of the tribe which had espoused it. The tribe thus envisaged was, of course, a very large one . . . but a tribe it nonetheless was. It was called populus Christianus, the Christian people. [Munz 1967:57, 135-136]

But however much Charlemagne may have looked on Catholicism as a vehicle for “unity, stability, and hierarchy,” it became the “vehicle of high learning” for the European High Middle Ages as well. I propose this to be the key to the problem. However primitive they may be in the Dark Ages and the early years of the new civilizations, by the time each civilization is mature these churches have become fully integrated formal knowledge systems, fully suitable for transfer to uncivilized areas as messengers of civilization, as Orthodoxy was to Kievan Russia above. To appreciate such a system one need only imagine his own field of study: Every such field includes its own compendium of assumptions, facts and at-
titudes, of knowledge that is assumed by every member of the profession to be indoctrinated background in every other member of the profession. And indeed every field would be in complete chaos without some such background systematization. On the larger scale we may speak to Science itself, a discipline which has its own assumptions and other background information and which presumably subsumes and incorporates every "physical" fact in the universe. Science is just such a formal knowledge system, and so are the medieval churches, and so is Marxism-Leninism. All of them are organizations of both ideology and fact, distilled into a package which can be transported elsewhere in a body. A medieval church is a civilization complete except for a population; one need only add people and the mixture can evolve indefinitely.

But this is only Europe and Byzantium. For a supposedly parallel experience the obvious candidate for next inspection is China, which two centuries before Rome had an experience so like the fall of Rome that the resemblance has been remarked elsewhere:

[T]he roots of the barbarian disaster of Chin China were struck deep in the Han, and particularly the Later Han, period. . . . It is highly interesting to note that the dissolution of the Chinese Empire in the early fourth century amidst barbarian uprisings bears striking resemblance to the fall of the Roman Empire in the West in the face of the Gothic invasions. If we looked into the matter a little more deeply, we would find even more interesting similarities in details. The barbarian policy of the Roman Empire, if any, seems also to have been to absorb the Germans into the frontier provinces with a view to eventually civilizing them. Like the shih-kuo or subject states of the Han, Rome also allowed these inner barbarians to organize themselves into separate units known as Federates. . . . Like the inner barbarians in Han-China, the Federates also guarded the Roman frontiers from within against the inroads of other barbarians, or even their kinsfolk, in return for Roman pay and lands. . . .

Close Sino-barbarian intercourse, especially economic intercourse, also affected the way of life of the Chinese of our period to some extent, which for brevity is here referred to as "barbarization." From the historical point of view, it seems that Later Han society was far more barbarized than Former Han society. The following three selected instances will suffice to serve the purpose of illustration. First, let us begin with the emperor and the aristocracy. Emperor Ling (168-188) is reported to have been thoroughly barbarized in his daily life. He liked not only barbarian clothes, curtains, beds, chairs, rice but also barbarian music and dance.
This imperial example of barbarization, as we are told, was in turn followed by all the nobles in the capital. . . . [Yü 1967:203-213]

Hord (1987b) suggested, on the basis of the above quotation and other evidence, that the fall of Han constitutes a legitimate parallel to the breakup of the Roman Empire ca. AD 395. The following centuries marked the transition between Classical and medieval civilization in Europe and Byzantium, but there is no consensus of any such transition between two successive Chinese civilizations. But is this attitude merely ideological and retrospective, a judgment by Confucianist scholars that the Buddhist centuries were an aberration and should not be counted as part of a proper course of Chinese development? If one compared the development of Europe and Byzantium up to ca. 1100 with that of China up to ca. 800, without reference to later developments, the parallel between the two histories would be much more striking. In Europe and Byzantium by ca. 1100 the influence of the Catholic and Orthodox churches had become very great indeed; likewise in T'ang China we find the following situation:

If today Chinese civilization seems almost synonymous with Confucian culture, we need to be reminded of the long centuries in which China lay under the spell of Buddhism and Taoism. For nearly eight centuries, from the fall of Han (A.D. 220) to the rise of Sung (960), Chinese culture was so closely identified with Buddhism that less civilized neighbors like the Japanese and Koreans embraced the one with the other, and thought of great T'ang China, the cynosure of the civilized world, as perhaps more of a "Buddha-land" than the "land of Confucius." The famed centers of learning to which pilgrims came from afar were the great Buddhist temples, where some of the best Chinese minds were engaged in teaching and developing new schools of Buddhist philosophy. The great works of art and architecture, which impressed these same visitors with the splendor of China, were most often monuments to the Buddha. Until the close of this period not even one first-rate mind appeared among the Confucianists who could dispute the pre-eminence of the Buddhist philosophers or slow the progress of the Taoist church, officially supported by the T'ang imperial house. Indeed, it may be said that during this period, while there were Confucian scholars, there were virtually no Confucianists, that is, persons who adhered to the teachings of Confucius as a distinct creed, which set them apart from others. [de Bary 1960:369]

Comparison with the Mediterranean world would then suggest that some transition existed in China parallel to the imperial re-
integrations during the reigns of Justinian in Byzantium and the sons of Clovis in Europe, at some time between the fall of Han (AD 220) and the establishment of T'ang (628). If the transition from a pragmatic imperial (Han) society to the later religious society is to be identified, then the end of the third century AD, the age of the Western Chin dynasty (effectively AD 265-300), is easily the best candidate:

The Ch'in and Han had made China into a unified empire. It had been necessary to introduce a method of centralizing power, and a system of order and authority based on a highly structured administrative and military machine; its ideology had to be essentially pragmatic, somewhat like that of imperial Rome. . . . The collapse of the Han dynasty during the second and third centuries A.D., together with the political, social, and economic problems that it brought about, resulted in a period of intellectual ferment unequaled in Chinese history except at the end of the Chou period (fourth to third centuries B.C.) and the end of the Ming dynasty (sixteenth to seventeenth centuries A.D.) and the revolutions of the twentieth century. During that period certain philosophical concepts evolved that were to be essential to later Chinese thought and to mark it indelibly. When Buddhism was introduced about the beginning of our era and began, from the fourth century onward, to penetrate into the educated elite, it accentuated these changes while at the same time altering their emphasis. Buddhism was adapted to the Chinese mind by a slow process in which it was mingled with and grafted onto Taoism, and it was to dominate “medieval” China until the end of the first millennium. [Demieville 1986:808]

In the late third and early fourth century we find the first unmistakable signs of the formation of an intellectual clerical elite . . . creators and propagators of a completely sinicized Buddhist doctrine which from that time onward starts to penetrate into the Chinese upper classes. . . . There are several facts which point to the years 290-320 as the period in which this supremely important development took place, because the extant literature begins to mention Buddhism increasingly and in increasingly important circumstances just at this time [Zürcher 1959:71]. By AD 300 the imperial capital “boasted forty-two pagoda temples” [Tuan 1969:91]. Another parallel is that just as the reigns of Justinian in the east and the sons of Clovis in the west saw the height of imperial expansion and reunification for the period, so also Western Chin saw the only reunification of China between Han and Sui. As of this time the twin churches Buddhism and Taoism set the pattern for medieval China. This pattern was changed after AD 1000, by a classical revival which replaced Buddhism and Taoism with a much modified Con-
Hucianism. But this too is paralleled elsewhere: The West also saw a classical revival at the corresponding period, that is some two centuries later (ca. AD 1200 in Europe, as ca. AD 1000 in China), and if Neo-Confucianism seems to have been much more overwhelmingly successful in China than the Classical (principally Aristotelian and Justinianic) revival in Europe, this does not seem proper grounds for saying that the previous transition to a religious orientation never happened. Thus a transition would seem to have occurred in China to a new religious formal knowledge system just as it did in Europe.

If these knowledge systems are necessary to civilization and demarcate the transition from one civilization to another, the next question would seem to be whether one “knowledge system” equates to one “civilization.” Is there a useful distinction between knowledge systems and civilizations?

The obvious answer to this question is “yes.” If it were so simple to identify the defining element of each individual civilization, then it would have been defined and agreed upon long ago, and the members of this Society would not have been throwing definitions past each other for the last three decades. Moreover, the above statements have already proposed two distinct, but both Christian, civilizations as immediate successors to the Roman Empire (in Europe and Byzantium) and medieval China has been treated as a single civilization in spite of having at least two distinct religious knowledge system (Buddhism and Taoism). Likewise the present-day United States recognizes at least three distinctly separate formal knowledge systems as being valid, even when they contradict each other: Christianity, Science, and nationalism. Evidently if formal knowledge systems are characteristic of civilization, the two are not necessarily therefore coterminous.

The case of the civilization with multiple knowledge systems is the easiest to deal with. There is of course the possibility that the civilization will be hopelessly splintered among the warring partisans of the different knowledge systems; in this case one may argue whether a civilization actually exists, as against a congeries of warring ideas. This is the case in some partially, but only partially, Westernized civilizations today, with added complications from foreign interference in such especially complex areas as Lebanon. Alternatively, there may be no large-scale dissension
among the competing systems. A civilization in this situation keeps the peace simply by refusing to admit that any conflict exists; there is a loose, usually unsystematized belief that the different knowledge systems are only parts of some unidentified higher system. In such a situation it does not matter if there is conflict between minorities composed of fervent partisans of the individual systems, so long as the government and most of the people continue to refuse to recognize this conflict. The partisans will be considered an annoyance but not a crucial challenge. The problems between Science and Christianity in the United States, or between Judaism and nationalism in Israel, will illustrate. A similar attitude was emphasized in medieval China:

Successive T'ang sovereigns encouraged the idea of the fundamental compatibility of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. . . . [D]espite the protest of Confucian orientated officials, under Hsüan tsung's immediate predecessors, resources that might have gone into the upkeep of [Confucian] ritual precincts or buildings were used on a lavish scale for Buddhist and Taoist temples. In the second half of Hsüan tsung's reign, the emperor's promotion of Taoism and establishment of Taoist schools and temples . . . again must have been to the detriment of the programme prescribed by the Confucian ritual code. Emperors were also likely to take up and develop their own religious interests, perhaps new or dubiously canonical cults, on the margins of orthodoxy. They were often supported in this by the ambitious or opportunistic, from within the bureaucracy or outside it. [McMullen 1987:223]

An even more striking example of the early medieval Chinese attitude toward different religions may be found in a pronouncement of the Emperor T'ang and T'ai-tsung in 635, concerning the arrival of Nestorian Christianity in China:

The Way has more than one name. There is more than one Sage. Doctrines vary in different lands, their benefits reach all mankind. O Lo Pen [Ruben?], a man of great virtue from Ta Ts'in (the Roman Empire), has brought his images and books from afar to present them in our capital. After examining his doctrines we find them profound and pacific. After studying his principles we find that they stress what is good and important. His teaching is not diffuse and his reasoning is sound. This religion does good to all men. Let it be preached freely in Our Empire. [Fitzgerald 1961:336]

If one civilization can have several formal knowledge systems, can one formal knowledge system also have several civilizations? Here again the answer is necessarily in the affirmative. The
European West has a long tradition of considering itself distinct from Byzantine civilization, yet both were based on the same Christian church. Spain and Britain also, in my analysis, entered the Middle Ages as civilizations distinct from Frankish Europe (built around the Kingdom of Asturias and Empire of León in Spain, around the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in England), and while both later amalgamated to some major extent with Europe, this cannot be said to have rendered their previous histories non-existent. This problem of autonomous development involves questions of detail that will for the moment be left for a future study.

There is next India. As discussed in Hord 1987b, the end of classical India, with the fall of the Gupta Empire ca. AD 450, shares very many characteristics with the fall of Rome and the fall of Han China. There was an imperial collapse followed by centuries of barbarian invasions and rule [Thapar 1966:142]; there was an economic collapse [Kosambi 1965:1961]; there was reversion to a barter economy accompanied by the rise of serfdom and a landed aristocracy [Sharma 1980:44-80]. Most particularly, the end of ancient India, like the Later Roman and Later Han empires, saw a major religious transition. In Classical Greece and Rome and in Chou China, religion had been a matter not just of the relationship of individuals with the supernatural but of the state with the supernatural and of individuals with the state. For Rome in particular the position of man, state and universe in the state religion seems almost contractual, but the same could be said for the relationship of the Athenians to Athens and to Athena and likewise elsewhere around Greece, and the magical central position of the rulers of ancient China is discussed at length in Hord (1987a). In both the Mediterranean world and China this ancient integration is well known to have fallen apart during the last centuries BC, in favor of a stewpot of, first philosophies, then religions, that stressed only the relationship of individuals with the universe—in the Mediterranean area Stoicism and Epicureanism, then the Hellenistic mystery religions; in China the long evolution of Taoism and the introduction of Buddhism. India saw the same kind of change during the last centuries BC:

From what has been said above it will appear that the most remarkable facts in the religious history of the period are the amazing diversity of
beliefs, a proneness to reverence, either towards gods or towards men of wisdom and morality, an eager pursuit of religious truths, and a tendency to make experiments in religious matters. Once the hold of the Vedic cult lost its grip and, later, the formalism of the Brahmanas and the abstruse speculations of the Upanishads failed to satisfy the common man, the more earnest and devout souls sought comfort in bhakti [devotion] to a personal god, while a bolder but not always more intellectual section sought out a saint or religious reformer. . . . The most significant religious phenomena were, however, the rise into prominence of the two major gods, Vishnu and Siva, and the establishment of the two major dissenting sects, Jainism and Buddhism. The minor sects had to make alliance with one or other of these, and were gradually absorbed into or transformed by these major cults. The period is also characterized by the virtual disappearance, toward its close, of the importance of Indra and Prajapati, the two outstanding divine figures of the Vedic and the Brahmanic age respectively. [Bhattacharyya 1951:474-475]

In Greece, Rome, and China the eventual winners of this competition were largely imported religions, Christianity and Buddhism. India also had one of these, called Saurism, the religion of the sun god Surya, which “receive[d] a sudden accession of strength through the infiltration of Persian beliefs and the installation of [Persian-style] images soon after [Bhattacharyya 1951:465].” The Saura faith continues even today, but it was not among the most successful competitors. The situation is somewhat confused, because the texts are composites produced over centuries and religious evolution continued through all this period. But the Gupta developments seem to have been decisive:

The religious movement definitely swings from the abstract to the concrete. The ceremonial worship of the images of Vishnu, Siva, and other gods . . . takes the place of sacrificial offerings to the host of unseen Vedic gods of vague personality. Even the austere and rigid morality of Buddhism and Jainism gives way to devotion to the concrete personalities of Buddha and Mahavira. Soon . . . hosts of lesser divinities gather round these primary figures. The resulting changes are great indeed in all cases [Majumdar 1970:370]

Another source refers to “the new upheaval of Hinduism under the Guptas” such that the Hinduism “established through the Puranas during the Gupta era became the religion of the Indian people” [Bhattacharji 1970:19, 99]. These new religions were of domestic rather than foreign origin, so the degree of change of orientation is not as obvious in India as in the Mediterranean
world and China. But the actuality of a major change of religion seems to be agreed upon.

In India as in the Mediterranean world and China, the following centuries saw a recovery oriented around the new universal religions. But while we Westerners generally consider Rome to have given birth to multiple following civilizations (at least Europe and Byzantium), pre-Muslim India has with equal certainty been considered more or less a single unit. Even Toynbee considered medieval India all part of a single Hindu Society. But India of the later first millennium AD not only had several different religions, it also tended to concentrate these religions in different regions (albeit with very little of the exclusivity and intolerance found around the Mediterranean). The Tamil-nad (the south) emphasized Saiva Hinduism:

In the long period of Cola rule [ca. 900-1200] the Hindu temple attained the zenith of its influence on the social life of the country. . . . Most [local endowments] centered round the village temple which, from somewhat obscure religious origins, had grown by the time of the Colas to dominate every aspect of social life all over the country. The role of the temple in the secular life of its neighbourhood can hardly be exaggerated. [Nilakanta-Sastri 1955:512, 652]

In the northern Deccan, across the middle of India, the rulers of the eighth through twelfth centuries are remarked as great patrons of Jainism. . . . Their emergence into power proved a great boon for the propagation and glorification of the faith. . . . It was not only these predominant royal houses that patronised Jainism, but the faith was adopted by several feudatory chiefs and small rulers in the land as well. . . . Jain temples, shrines, images, tombs, and epitaphs . . . amply testify that during this period the Jain religion was extremely popular and constituted a living faith of all classes of people from royalty to peasantry, inspiring them to deeds of piety and philanthropy during life, and affording them solace and hope in death. [Jain 1979:429-431]

During the heyday of its power there was not a single dynasty in the Deccan that did not come under the influence of Jainism at one time or another. Non-Jain rulers also patronised Jainism. Ministers, generals, women—all played their part as devout Jains. [Pulsaker 1984:292]

Bengal and Bihar are known in this period for their emphasis on Mahayana Buddhism, but the extent of Buddhist influence in this region and period is not stated. On the other hand, it is remarked quite forthrightly of the ruling dynasty that its founder “was a
Buddhist and so were all his successors” through almost four centuries of rule [Majumdar 1984:44], indeed they were “above all, zealous Buddhists” [Moreland and Chatterjee 1944:114], which should be a good indicator of a powerful and lasting influence.

There is also the possibility of a fourth Indian regional nucleus based on Vaishnava Hinduism (not to mention a fifth and sixth around Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Burma). The proposed core region for Vaishnava development, contemporaneous with the other three, is northwestern India:

From 700 A.D. onwards, Vaisnavism emerges [in north India] as a comprehensive, all-pervading movement. Apart from incorporating local and tribal deities into its pantheon, it also admitted people of divergent views, social standing and financial status. This probably accounts for the fact that many petty rulers whose inscriptions range from 8th to 12th century and whose political status and lineage is not exactly clear, were ardent followers and patrons of Vaisnavism. [Bhagowalia 1980:160.]

The case for a separate Vaishnava core is not as good as the others, partly because the area was invaded and largely occupied by the Muslims before this development was mature, partly because the religion was rather more influential outside its core region, in south India, than this model would predict, to the extent that “the greatest stronghold of Vaisnavism in post-Gupta India [is suggested to be] the Tamil country” [Sircar 1984:312]. This perception may be a product of intellectual prejudice; in the prospective homeland of Vaishnava civilization, northwest India, development was of a folk religion of distinctly “vulgar” type [Majumdar 1979:435-436], while contemporary south India saw the emergence of the intellectually important Srivaishnava philosophers [Sircar 1979:436-442]. On the other hand, it is the “folk” religions that belong to the whole people of a civilization rather than just to court intellectuals. But in any case north Indian Vaishnavism was undergoing the standard development of the times, and so may qualify as a separate fourth regional development inside medieval India.

These religions interacted with one another and existed in one another’s associated empires, and eventually a somewhat more generic and consolidated Hinduism won the day, but from ca. AD 600 to 1200 they were distinct and separable faiths. In terms of
civilizations with their own patronized formal knowledge systems, if medieval Europe and Byzantium are accounted separate even though based on the same original church, then medieval India produced at least three separate civilizations, with the possibility of a fourth.

There is next the question of degree of influence. How important is each formal knowledge system to its associated civilization at different times in the development of that civilization? So far in this essay the formal knowledge system has been treated as a single unchanging entity, but in fact such knowledge systems exist in time like everything else, and their positions can and do change. Consider again the history of Christianity in Western civilization. Western thinkers were aware of the existence of the preceding Classical civilization from the beginning, but at first the ancient knowledge did not constitute a competitor to Christianity. While the civilization was still taking form, people saw the ancient ways through Christian eyes:

Perhaps, wrote Alouin, a new Athens will arise in Francia ‘only much more excellent,’ and as if in anticipation of the event he and his companions adopted, in their more intimate moments, the great names of antiquity. . . . Aachen, where the court had its favorite residence, was ‘the second Rome,’ and everything was done to give the impression that the whole of antiquity, Hebrew, Greek, and Roman, was being resuscitated at a breath. To a real classical scholar, or to the men of the Byzantine Empire, where the classical tradition had never been broken, it would have been tempting to laugh at these serious-minded Franks who strutted about pretending to be Romans, for they were unmistakably Germanic. But, in spite of all their play-acting, Charlemagne and his scholars had grasped one of the fundamental truths which make civilization real—that knowledge had to be loved for its own sake. . . .

Equally important was the fact that the revival of learning spread beyond the sphere of religious education. A new style of writing, the Carolingian miniscule, which was both beautiful and clear, was introduced and rapidly adopted by scribes throughout Charlemagne’s dominion. . . . It is no exaggeration to say that it is to the scholars of this period that we owe our knowledge of the classics. The fact is attested in a most impressive way; for when, some seven centuries later, the humanists of the Renaissance were ransacking the libraries of Europe for manuscripts of the classics, the great majority that they found were written in Carolingian miniscule—so much so, that they mistook the handwriting for that of the ancient Romans themselves, called it scripture Romana, and propagated it as the only classical hand.

In one respect, however, the Carolingian renaissance was markedly different from that of the fifteenth century. It was fundamentally Chris-
Charlemagne did not distinguish between 'the classics' and 'the Fathers,' except to wish that the former had been Christian. To him, Jerome, Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Virgil were all equally Roman. His favorite book, we are told, was St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*. In this work we have a direct link between Charlemagne's literary renaissance and his political ideals, for there can be no doubt that it exercised an enormous influence on his conception of kingship. It was not, however, the precise influence that St. Augustine would have intended, since it was founded on a misunderstanding of his text. For the term 'city of God' and 'society of the faithful,' which had been used by St. Augustine to denote the mystical body of the faithful in all eternity, were taken by Charlemagne to denote the community of Christians on earth, and he therefore applied them to the Church of Rome and the Kingdom of the Franks. To him it seemed that these two institutions were but one society. Was not Charlemagne the Lord's anointed ('David') and were not the Franks 'the Christian people' (*populus christianus*)? [Davis 1970:137-139]

The height of influence of each religious knowledge system seems as a rule to be confined to the period beginning some four or five centuries after the fall of the preceding civilization. It lasts some four centuries, which also see the height of a growing empire oriented specifically toward that religion, as noted above for the Indian regional developments. Consider again the West, during the Holy Roman Empire of the Saxon and Salian dynasties:

But in fact the change to optimism had occurred a generation or two before [AD 1000], and was more probably caused by the cessation of the Viking, Saracen, and Hungarian raids [as the Saxon emperors established their realm]. It was visible in every aspect of life, political, economic, religious, and cultural, and particularly in an outburst of church-building which an eleventh-century monk described as follows:

‘One would have thought that the world was shaking itself to cast off its old age and was clothing itself everywhere in a white robe of churches. Thus nearly all the churches of episcopal sees, and all the other minsters of divers saints, and even the little village oratories, were reconstructed more beautifully than before.’

The author of this passage, Ralph Glaber, was apparently referring to the years 1002-3, and was therefore guilty of the wildest exaggeration; but the statement would be valid if it were applied to the whole period from 900 to 1250. During those three-and-a-half centuries the vast majority of the cathedrals and churches of the Latin West were built in their present form, at least in so far as their main fabric is concerned. For while the monuments that have survived from the Dark Ages (c. 400-900) consist of only a very few churches, fragments of churches, or crypts, those that have survived from the central period of the Middle Ages are innumerable. They are to be seen in very town and village of Western Europe, and still amaze us by their grandeur. . . . [T]he eleventh and
twelfth centuries [also] witnessed an ‘unregulated passion for monasticism’ among the laity. Turning over the pages of Dugdale’s *Monasticon* one gets the impression that there was hardly a single lord in twelfth-century England who did not have some share in the endowment of a monastery. [Davis 1970:203-204, 262]

And if as noted above the primacy of religion in China involved most of the first millennium AD, it is particularly noted for the T’ang dynasty:

> It is obvious to the most casually interested observer that during the T’ang dynasty Buddhism suffused T’ang life, penetrated every segment of Chinese society to a degree that it had not done before and was never to do again. [Twitchett and Wright 1973:18; see also Wright 1959:70-83]

Taoism may have been somewhat more a state religion:

> China’s reunification under the T’ang dynasty marked the beginning of Taoism’s most spectacular success. The dynasty’s founder, Li Yuan, claimed to be descended from the Lao-tzu. . . . This notion was built into the dynasty’s state ideology and the emperor was commonly referred to as the ‘sage’ (*sheng*). . . . Reports of Taoism’s dominance on the continent may still be read in the diaries of Japanese Buddhist pilgrims. . . . [T]he T’ang . . . saw itself as an essentially Taocratic realm. [Sidel and Strickmann 1986:403]

> At the height of T’ang’s glory . . . in the official figures for the empire of that time the Taoists had 1,687 monasteries and nunneries as against 5,358 for the Buddhists. . . . The T’ang examination system included an examination on the *Tao-te ching* and even one on the *Chuang-tzu*. Although we know little of those who took these examinations and what it availed them to pass, we do know these books had a profound influence on the T’ang elite. [Twitchett and Wright 1973:23-24]

But this predominance is temporary. T’ang Buddhism “penetrated every segment of Chinese society to a degree that it had not done before and was never to do again,” and under the Colas “the Hindu temple attained the zenith of its influence on the social life of the country.” These statements imply a decline following the glory years, and in fact once each knowledge system has reached this zenith of influence, its pre-eminence becomes subject to serious challenge. In India two of the churches, Buddhism and Jainism, lost their central position and one (Buddhism) even became essentially extinct. In Europe there occurred after the breakup of the Salian empire “the renaissance of the twelfth century,” with its rediscovery of Aristotle and Justinian and consequent upsurge of Classical ideas, including what may be called...
the invention of that competing knowledge system, modern Science. In China the classical revival was even more successful, as Neo-Confucianism displaced both Buddhism and Taoism as the ruling knowledge system of the civilization. Thus it would seem that development produces opportunities for major change. This change is by no means always beneficial; in India it involved re-establishment of a rigid caste system that has been called straightforwardly one of the two “foremost . . . causes of the downfall of the Hindus” [Saran and Majumdar 1979:126], and the reunification of China under the hypertrophied bureaucracy founded by the Sung may also be accounted the cause for the end of development in that country. But whether it is for good or ill, it does seem clear that the High Middle Ages of each civilization mark an unpredictable growth in complexity of each civilization’s relationship with its knowledge system(s).

This essay will leave further diachronic investigations of the development of knowledge systems to a later discussion. Part II of this paper will present hypotheses on the nature of formal knowledge systems as parts of civilization and on the effects of this concept on our interpretation of the nature of civilization.

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NOTES

1. The word “ethnocentric” properly refers to the assumptions of one’s own people rather than to the assumptions of one’s own knowledge system, and even in our modern times this is a seriously flawed usage. The assumption that at core all things are “purely physical” is an indoctrination from that formal knowledge system called Experimental Science, and science is not a monopoly of, say, the American people. One might call it a monopoly of the scientific people, but that expression is so strange that it would be more likely to confuse than to enlighten. Properly an adjectival form of “knowledge system” is needed here, but none such exists. One might offer the neologisms “epistemocentric,” coined from the Greek episteme, course of knowledge, or “paidecentric,” from the Greek paideia, education, suggested by the writings of Lowell Edmunds and Gordon Hewes respectively. The concepts behind episteme and paideia are not as all-embracing as that behind “formal knowledge system,” but either is close enough to serve.

2. The importation of these religions for political purposes is noted in Japan:
The significance of the Great Buddha was that it represented Rushana, the universal Buddha and symbol of the unity of the universe. The emperor Shomu, by calling himself the "slave" of Rushana, could nonetheless claim to be his earthly counterpart. For as Rushana presided over the universe in all its manifestations, so did the emperor assure the harmony of his state. Here was the ultimate use of religious symbolism for support of the state. In Buddhism, the government thus acquired, above and beyond Shinto, a powerful set of religious sanctions. And it is important to note that the relationship between the temporal authority and the Buddhist establishment remained similar to that which existed between the state and Shinto. [Hall 1970:57-60]

In Tibet:

It is difficult to explain why the Tibetan kings of that time favored Buddhism and most of the nobility Bon-po. A highly possible explanation is that the kings saw in the rising strength of the new religion a good opportunity to rid themselves of the aristocrats who were ever intriguing and counter-intriguing for more power. It was this king [Ral-pa-chen, 817-836] who raised the Buddhist rank and file to the status of a new aristocracy. He appointed a few Buddhists to important government posts to replace the nobles . . . [Shen and Liu 1953:26-27]

Regarding Burma the statement is made outright of the king who converted the country to Buddhism that "no doubt he saw in this religion a means of consolidating his rule over the whole country" [Wales 1973:2]. Likewise concerning the first Khmer ruler:

Jayavarman II's revival of the ancient Devaraja symbolism of universal kingship occurred after his occupation of Hariharalaya (819 or 820) . . . . The ruler thus became a Chakravartin, or universal ruler, or the divine essence of kingship. [Cady 1964:89]

These polities will be discussed in more detail in a later paper.

3. In the Khmer Empire this was temporary; for reasons that are not well understood, Theravada Buddhism replaced Saiva Hinduism as the principal religion of Cambodia after the fall of Angkor.

4. One may also find other events that might stand as transitions of civilizational stature. Regarding Byzantium for example:

Culturally, too, his [Heraclius', 610-641] reign marked a new era. If Justinian had been the last of the truly Roman Emperors, it was Heraclius who dealt the old Roman tradition its death-blow. Until his day, Latin was still regularly used by the civil service and even by the army—despite the fact that it was incomprehensible to the overwhelming majority of his subjects. At a moment when efficiency of communications was of paramount importance, such a state of affairs was clearly ridiculous; and it was Heraclius who decreed that Greek, for long the language of the people and the Church, should henceforth be the official language of the Empire. Within a generation, even among the educated classes, Latin became virtually extinct. Finally, by way of marking the end of the old Empire and setting the seal on the new, he abolished the ancient Roman titles of imperial dignity. Heretofore, like his predecessors, he had been formally hailed as Imperator
Caesar and Augustus; all these were now replaced by the old Greek word for king, Basileus—which was to remain the official title for as long as the Empire lasted. [Norwich 1989:311]

But this seems clearly a recognition of an already long-existing situation, and there seems to be some dissent whether Latin continued to be used into the reign of Heraclius:

As the sixth century draws to a close there is less and less sign of literary life. One symptom of decline is the disappearance of knowledge of Latin. At the beginning of the century the capital at least had been, if not a bilingual city, one in which both languages were well understood. The great grammarian Priscian wrote in Latin. It is certain that it was Justinian’s first language. The codification of the law, one of the greatest achievements of the reign, required a professional knowledge of it. But by the middle of the century the law students seem to have needed a crib of Justinian’s Code, the so-called Kata podas. John the Lydian laments that the use of Latin was abolished in the bureau for European affairs by order of John the Cappadocian, Justinian’s minister. . . . Whereas the historian Procopius had been a versatile linguist, there is much less sign that Agathias [the next major historian] . . . had similar talents. The loss of linguistic competence may have happened quite suddenly at the end of the century. The most striking proof of it is the story of Pope Gregory the Great who, in a letter dated 597, says that in Constantinople it is not possible to obtain a satisfactory translation. [Wilson 1983:58-59]

In any case the consensus seems to be that transition from Classical to Byzantine civilization, so far as it can be dated, occurred approximately in the reign of Justinian.

5. There is one other obvious parallel between Rome and China: Both the Roman Empire and the Han Empire split into two regional variants on dissolution, one part occupied by barbarian invaders and the other consciously the home of the old imperial tradition. There were two differences. In Rome the conscious continuator of old traditions was the long-settled east, in China the frontier south; in Rome the barbarian development was in the frontier west, in China it was in the long-settled north. In the former Roman Empire both halves developed future civilizations; in China, only the barbarian north managed to create a stable integration, and it reunified China. One may also compare India, albeit less well, since its records are not as complete. In India the old heartland of the Ganges Basin went to the Mahayana Buddhist Pala dynasty, which may easily have been the least integrated, most thoroughly “feudalized” part of medieval India, while the frontier far south went to the “almost Byzantine royalty of Rajaraja [Chola, ca. AD 1000] and his successors with its numerous palaces, officials, and ceremonials and its majestic display of the concentrated resources of an extensive empire [Nilakanta-Sastri 1955:447].”

6. There are occasionally efforts to formalize this peaceful coexistence, such as the formation in India of the idea of the Trimurti of Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva as an effort to unite formally the godheads of the Hindu religions.
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