

Western Civilization Part 2: From the Cradle to Modernity

by Sophie Dulesh

This is part 2 of a three-part series on the origin and evolution of Western civilization. Part 1, “Cradle of Western Civilization,” was published in the March, 2017, issue of Humanist Perspectives (#200).

What Is “Progress”?

The universe shows no evidence of any purpose or meaning, rendering inapplicable the idea of historical progress in the sense of movement in a vector toward some supreme goal(s). Yet both the inorganic and organic worlds seem to have direction as they unfold over time as we experience it: both evolve (progress?) from simpler to more complex forms. After the Big Bang, hot plasma gave rise to galaxies, while the organic ‘broth’ in hot volcanic pools eventually gave rise to humans. In the words of Yuval Harari, “[from] a cosmic satellite it becomes crystal clear that history is moving relentlessly toward unity...”¹ This idea, known in epistemology as ‘reductionism,’ has many advocates. It is an attempt to explain the universe with a minimum (ideally just one) of basic, irreducible laws of nature. The Unified Field Theory, a reductionist scientific “theory of everything,” attempts to converge many ‘regional’ scientific arrows into a few universal ones (perhaps even a single one), symbolizing the way of progress.

Concepts of Time

Let us start with an overview of historical concepts of the flow of time during which progress may (or may not) unfold naturally.

The idea of time-keeping is believed to have originated in ancient Egypt, which depended on the seasonal flooding of the Nile. In Rome, the lunar calendar (with 12 months or 355 days) is thought to have been introduced in the seventh century BCE. Julius Caesar (100 – 44 BCE) fine-tuned it to the modern Western way of timekeeping.

The ancient Jews also made a contribution:

“We have years because of the sun, months because of the moon, and weeks because of the Jews... Shabbat... changed the way the world thought about time. Prior to, people measured time either by the sun...or by the moon... Even though [Jews] still [had] slaves, one day in seven they would enjoy the same freedom as their owners.”²

Thomas Cahill, an historian who studied at both Christian and Jewish seminaries in New York City, asserts that the ancient Jews were the first to develop the revolutionary idea of a non-circular pattern of time flow,³ necessary for the very idea of progress. Ancient humanity (Hindus, Sumerians, Assyrians, Greeks) considered time flow to be circular, with all future events predetermined by events of the past, in a cyclically inescapable pattern like the turns of a spiral. This created the idea of an immutable world order consisting of the eternal cycles of reincarnation (“wheels of rebirth”).

The natural motion... is circular, because the sphere is the only perfect form, and circular motion is the only perfect motion. Circular motion has no beginning and no end; it returns into itself and goes on forever: it is motion *without change*.⁴

In this endless repetition, any hope of progress is doomed – a strikingly anti-dialectic and uninspiring concept.

Petrarch (1304–1374) became one of the first staunch proponents of a non-circular pattern of time in Renaissance Europe. After Petrarch, it took six more centuries before Albert Einstein quantified the passage of time as non-identical in different places, depending on the speed at which those places were moving relative to one another, and calculated that at the speed of light, time stops. In 1915, Einstein showed that our universe is a four-dimensional space-time continuum.

And it was only in 1927 that Arthur Eddington introduced the idea of the exclusively unidirectional vector or arrow of time (unlike the three non-vector dimensions of *space*), which forbids causality from working backwards. The causality of the inanimate world, tied by entropy (the inevitable dissolution of any system from order into disorder) to the arrow of time, is unidirectional, binary, and irreversible. Entropy can be used as a measure of time.

We are still far from a full understanding of this unique feature of time in our four-dimensional space-time continuum. Perhaps the arrow of time originated with the Big Bang, immediately after which time was slowest, matter densest and entropy lowest (that in itself has no explanation as yet). Ever since then, entropy has only increased (in accordance with the 2nd law of thermodynamics) and this may be uniquely responsible for all the differences between the past and the future as we know them (including the irreversibility of causality, aging, etc.). When entropy is as high as it can get, time in this system will have no direction, no arrow.

Ethical and Scientific Progress during Our Era up to Modernity

Religion, philosophy and science all played a critical role in shaping Western moral values.

Dualistic religions (eternal struggle between good and evil) along with animism and polytheism flourished from long before our era. Zoroastrianism flourished in Persia for over a thousand years and inspired other dualistic religions like Gnosticism and Manichaeism. During the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, the Manichaean creed spread from China to North Africa. Today dualism survives in localities of India and the Middle East.

The Judeo-Christian Religion

The earliest monotheist writings in the Hebrew Bible are dated around 1400 BCE and the latest around 450 BCE. Hence, the writings of the approximately thirty contributors to the Torah or Pentateuch (first five books of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament) span one thousand years. In the next half-millennium, nothing was added to the Bible.

It took only the last half of the first century CE to create the New Testament. The Messiah Jesus Christ inspired it, and half of it was created by one man, the Apostle Paul.

As Harari notes, parallel to and independent from those creeds that were all based on the dominance of a *supernatural* power,

...during the first millennium BC, religions of an altogether new kind began to spread through Afro-Asia. The newcomers, such as Jainism and Buddhism in India, Daoism and Confucianism in China, and Stoicism, Cynicism and Epicureanism in the Mediterranean basin, were characterised by their *disregard of gods*.

These creeds maintain that the superhuman [NOT supernatural] order governing the world is the product of *natural laws* rather than of divine wills and whims... Religion asserts that we humans are subject to a system of moral laws that we did not invent and... cannot change... (individually). *Religion is anything that confers superhuman legitimacy on human social structures...*¹ [Emphasis mine]

Harari continues:

Religion is interested above all in order. It aims to create and maintain the social structure... [Its] emergence made a vital contribution to the unification of humankind... The crucial factor in our conquest of the world was our ability to connect many humans to one another... because *Homo sapiens* is the only species on earth capable of cooperating flexibly in large numbers.

All large-scale human cooperation [and crucial mutual trust] is ultimately based on our belief in imagined orders [created by religion].”¹

Bishop Augustine of Hippo (354 - 430) advanced the new, Christian, vision of human destiny, namely that some humans are selected by God for heaven, and the rest doomed to damnation. This vision was later enhanced with Calvin’s (1509 –1564) idea of the total predetermination of one’s fate by God’s will, irrespective of one’s own efforts; the idea was grounded in an attempt to eliminate a “spiteful commerce” between God and man.

Augustine accepted the idea of a non-circular pattern of time flow that made his philosophy compatible with the idea of progress. However, his vicious religious exclusiveness was totally incongruous with an enlightened vision of progress encompassing all of humanity (in contrast to the few selected by God) and in the here and now (in contrast to in the afterlife).

Next to the Prophet John, Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202) is considered the most important theoretician of apocalyptic Messianism (the foundation of Christianity): “... the most influential scholar known to Europe until the appearance of Marxism.”⁵ Joachim’s insight of historical interest was his Trinitarian idea that the first world era had been the Age of the Father, the second – the Age of the Son; the third, after the Antichrist’s persecution, would be the utopian Age of the Holy Spirit: no wars, no poverty, no diseases. The first two Ages were each 42 generations long, the third – would be everlasting (and predicted to begin by the 1260s).

The Church had a powerful influence on education as well as being a unifying agent within the circle of co-religionists (its fierce exclusiveness and

divisiveness toward outsiders remained unmitigated). In addition to some other progressive social and ethical reforms, the Church established systems of administration and archiving. The monasteries were the first to introduce clocks and were the first collectors and interpreters; they preserved ancient manuscripts and through their learning centres helped to found the first universities of Europe (such as Bologna and Oxford).

Philosophy and Science

In Europe these disciplines were spurred by the rediscovery of works from the ancient world (translated from Greek to Latin via Arabic, Syriac or Hebrew copies) as discussed in part 1.⁶

Augustine brought Neoplatonism into Christianity and up to the 12th century it remained the dominant creed. From the 12th to the 16th century, it was replaced with the re-discovered Aristotelian authority as, by that time, the writings of Archimedes, Euclid, and Ptolemy had also become accessible in Europe. The Church fought fiercely, but in vain, against this and twice, in 1215 and 1277, officially condemned Aristotle’s views.

Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) was instrumental in the spread of the newly acquired

respect for the ‘light of reason’ (alongside the ‘light of grace’), that is, of rationality, the intelligibility of Nature, and the renaissance of thinking. However, Europe at the time was not quite ready for an enlightenment, either economically, intellectually or socially. Countless religious and dynastic wars, the Arab conquests between the 7th and 17th centuries, the Mongol invasions that devastated Russia and Eastern Europe in the 13th

Europe was not ready for an enlightenment and Aristotelian teachings were becoming petrified dogmas, obtained by a priori scholastic reasoning, rejecting skepticism and paralyzing progress

to 15th centuries, as well as famines and plagues, all ravaged and repeatedly decimated populations.

The Black Death, one of the most devastating pandemics in human history, killed an estimated 75 to 200 million people in Eurasia between 1346 and 1353. Rats, carriers of the plague, moved to Europe from Asia along the Silk Road.

Pope Gregory IX (1227 – 1241) associated cats with devil worship and had them exterminated en masse. It has been suggested that this allowed rat populations to skyrocket to an epidemiologically critical level.

Europe was not ready for an enlightenment and Aristotelian teachings were becoming petrified dogmas, obtained by *a priori* scholastic reasoning, rejecting skepticism and paralyzing progress. Science was based on ‘rationalism,’ but that was understood as acquiring true knowledge through mental constructions alone (through innate spiritual clairvoyance). Calvin suggested that humans have an ability to directly receive divine instructions.

The New Scientific Method

Methodologically, medieval philosophy was scholastic and deductive. In the scholastic approach, the use of common reason (sometimes called instrumental as opposed to critical or skeptical reason) was the prevalent tool to explain how things work. Scholasticism later evolved into empiricism: “all knowledge is derived from sensory experience, observation.” This idea, progressive at the time, was advocated among others by John Locke (1632 –1704) and David Hume (1711–1776).

The fundamental principles of the new scientific

Many of the Aquinas’ revolutionary social ideas were inherited by Locke: both denied the absolute power of human authority, both thought that good government is not provided by Divine Providence but rather is a social contract, a rational agreement.

method, formulated by Galileo Galilei (1564– 1642), Francis Bacon (1561– 1626), Rene Descartes (1596– 1650), and others, were based on the perception that nature is founded on universal *natural laws* (hence the name “naturalism”), which are accessible through knowledge that accumulates

endlessly in successive generations,

allowing men more and more mastery of nature (which Hegel called “acquiring more and more freedom” ⁷). True knowledge is derived from experience, from perceptions by our sense organs and reflection of the mind on these perceptions, while the social environment shapes what people think or believe.

Many of the Aquinas’ revolutionary social ideas were inherited by Locke: both denied the absolute power of human authority, both thought that good government is not provided by Divine Providence but rather is a social contract, a rational agreement. Locke’s philosophy, already based on scientific methodology, became fundamental to the dialectic liberal and reformist Western creed. The European Enlightenment developed from a skeptical evidence-based experimental approach.

Ideas of social progress were also pioneered by Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527) and nearly three centuries later, M.-J. Condorcet (1743– 1794) envisioned a democratic society of equal opportunity, liberty and rationality, based on science and universal education, whose primary objective was to bring about the indefinite perfectibility of the human species.

Thus, the very concept of progress was based on the success of the natural sciences in providing the only proven way to accumulate knowledge and serving as a directional ‘defining rail’– while not themselves being the essence of progress.

Hegel, however, stressed that historical progress does not unfold exclusively through the development of reason but rather through

its interplay with human passions (including a craving for recognition).⁷ In our times, this way of thinking (with emotions commonly labeled “intuition”) is attracting more attention.

Major Humanitarian Ideas

Three major ideas have emerged and gained ascendancy since the 18th century: individualism (in contrast to the overarching community-centred mentality of the past); a craving for betterment in the here and now (rather than waiting for the hereafter); and a democratic egalitarianism for all (not just for the chosen few). This social development was grounded in the philosophical dialectic idea of evolutionary change in the natural world, knowable through the objective evidence obtained by observation, experiment and rationalization.

The Protestant Reformation and Martin Luther’s (1483–1546) emphatic call for the faith of the individual (“We all are our own priests”) fractured Europe’s former seemingly monolithic belief in Church hierarchy and an unshakable divine order. In Germany, Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) founded the *Haskalah*, a Jewish Renaissance, based on the idea that Judaism is a religion focused only on ethical issues while the intellect must be free from religious restrictions to pursue evidence-based rationality.

Kant (1724–1804) asserted that enlightenment would materialize when people began to ‘dare to think for yourself’ or *Sapere aude*, the expression used by Horace in his ‘First Book of Letters’ in 20 BCE. In the Middle Ages in Europe, the source of all meaning and authority was external, hence education preached obedience, scriptures were memorized and ancient traditions studied. It is still so

Three major ideas have emerged and gained ascendancy since the 18th century: individualism; a craving for betterment in the here and now; and a democratic egalitarianism for all.

in the Islamic world. In contrast, modern Western education teaches one to “think for yourself.”

Kant preached that reason is the

ultimate source of the foundational moral principles (“categorical imperatives”) that naturally instill in humans the paramount ethical law of every person’s unalienable right to respect, any man-made laws notwithstanding. Rational morality, he thought, is centred on individual (not communal) rights and responsibilities. The French Revolution’s (1789) *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* that ended aristocratic privilege was proof for Kant of humanity’s emergence from self-imposed immaturity, a process he termed Enlightenment: a global experiment to make man empowered and free.

As described by Francis Fukuyama,

Hegel believed that Christianity paved the way to the French revolution [by taking the Christian vision of a free and equal society in the hereafter and trying to implement it in the here and now]. Most new democracies since 1970 have been Catholic countries. But religion *per se* did not create free societies; Christianity... had to abolish itself through a secularization of its goals before liberalism could emerge. This secularization in the West [began with] Protestantism by making religion a private matter between a person and God... The idea of freedom received its form... in Christianity, because this religion was the first to establish... the universal equality of all men in the sight of God, on the basis of their faculty for moral choice between right or wrong... The Christian did not realize that God did not create man, but that man created God as a projection of the idea of freedom. But the Christian then proceeded to enslave himself to this God... Christianity was thus a new form of slavery. The slave, through his work, [according to Hegel] did much of the job of liberating himself: he mastered nature according to his own ideas.⁸

Hegel thought that the fundamental transition that defined modern life was the “domestication of the slave and his metamorphosis into the eco-

conomic man” (not unlike what had been achieved in ancient Rome⁶); this, and Christianity, both contributed to the emergence of liberal democratic societies in Europe.

“The historical process rests on the twin pillars of rational [material] desire and rational [non-material] recognition; modern liberal democracy is the political system that best satisfies these two in some kind of balance.”⁸ Recognition is also variably called ‘dignity,’ ‘prestige,’ ‘honour’ (sometimes ‘vanity’) and is considered by most, from Plato (427– 347 BCE) to Nietzsche (1844–1900), to be the basis of virtues or the seat of what social scientists call ‘values’ and neuroscientists call ‘value-based intuition.’

It is notable that the Christian interpretation of what constitutes the basis for human equality differs from that of both Hobbes (1588–1679) and Locke. In Christianity, it is based on the universality of the faculty for making moral choices; for Hobbes, on the fact that all humans are capable of killing, while for Locke, on the fact that humans have equal faculties.

For Hobbes, Locke and the American Founding Fathers, liberal society is a reciprocal and equal agreement among citizens not to interfere with each other’s lives and property. Hegel also saw liberal society as the space for citizens to mutually recognize each other. This differential appreciation of the relative moral weight of the desire for recognition versus the fear of violent death makes all the difference between Hegel’s views and those of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of liberalism.

For Hegel, the consciousness of the master is in some sense more ‘human’ than that of a slave,

who cannot rise above his ‘animal nature’ (his primary concern being a fear of violent death) and is therefore less free. For Hobbes, there is nothing whatsoever redeemable in the craving for recognition, which he sees as the root of misery. For Hobbes, all concepts of justice and right are based on, and pursue, one’s physical preservation, and all deviations from them are sources of war, destruction and death.

The Age of Enlightenment

European philosophers of the 16th and 17th centuries believed that the conditions of human life were destined to improve over time, such that in the long run all humankind would share equally in the same advances. Their optimism and passionate

belief in change and the progress of reason was a real breakthrough in itself, materialized in the French Revolution, while Napoleon’s army spread the new worldview around Europe.

Later it was frequently challenged by various religious revivals and political ideologies (such as, for example, ethnic nationalism

and fascism), but Enlightenment thought has shown remarkable resilience. “People strongly felt that theirs was an enlightened age... Everywhere there was a feeling that Europeans had at last emerged from a long twilight... The sense of progress was all but universal among the educated classes...”⁸ As explained by Pankaj Mishra:

The European sense of time changed: belief in divine providence – Second Coming or Final Days – gave way to a conviction, also intensely religious [meaning *superhuman*], in human progress in the here and now...The changes brought about by two coalescing

European philosophers of the 16th and 17th centuries believed that the conditions of human life were destined to improve over time, such that in the long run all humankind would share equally in the same advances.

revolutions, the French and the Industrial, marked a sharp break in historical continuity; they inaugurated what we now call modernity – the world of mass politics and ceaseless social and economic change, and a whole new universe of possibilities about how human beings could act in and shape history, collectively and individually... Progress... denoted the endless growth of a society whose individuals are free but responsible, egocentric but enlightened... Until 1789, almost all major European thinkers saw progress as something imposed from above, through legislation and decree, not generated from the mass of people below them... Within a decade, the 1790s, two concepts, ‘nationalism’ [whose philosophical father was Johannes Herder, 1744–1803] and ‘communism,’ had been invented to define the aspirations for fraternity and equality. ‘Democracy’ came into vogue around 1830.⁹

Thinkers like John Milton (1608– 1674), Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Baruch Spinoza (1632– 1677) pioneered the social ideas that are based on modern ethical values: governing as social contract, the moral limits of power, liberty of conscience, tolerance as the foundation of civilized society and human rights. Hobbes was not a democrat but he was one of the founders of liberalism and the first to establish that the legitimacy of government stems from the rights of those governed, not from divine rights or the natural superiority of the governors.

Spinoza’s pantheistic ideas proclaimed that one’s existence is not to be at the expense of others, but to form part of the network of community. Spinoza was the founder of the critical-historical approach to the exegesis that later evolved into the renowned Higher Criticism of the Bible.

Incomes, literacy and civility in the upper crust of Western society skyrocketed; violence faded. Until the late modern era, more than 90% of humans were farmers. Around 400 CE,

the average *per capita* income barely covered a minimal subsistence globally; by 1500, in Europe, it doubled. Flush toilets, invented in 1775, reduced the frequency of epidemics. Homicide rates in Europe declined sharply starting from the 17th century, largely due to the rise of the state. The last known execution of a witch (widely used as scapegoats by the Church) occurred in 1722 in Scotland. By 1800, torture went out of use in Europe and literacy nearly doubled between the 17th and 18th centuries.

Isaac Newton (1642–1726) and Charles Darwin (1809–1882) laid the foundations of the modern understanding of the laws guiding inorganic and organic evolution, respectively, without a Designer. Increasingly, mass education became a powerhouse for progress. Condorcet in France and Thomas Jefferson (1743– 1826) in America were among the very first to advocate for a publicly controlled (NOT clergy-controlled) mass education.

The seventeenth century became the classical age of European philosophy of evolutionary and causal (or ‘Cartesian’ after René Descartes) naturalism and the concepts of “natural rights” and “natural law.” Created by the ancient Greeks, having survived the Middle Ages, and advanced by Locke and Kant, those concepts held that the universe is fundamentally natural and orderly, and that there is natural rightness or justice

which is the same for all people and knowable by reason. The Pope in 1690 condemned the Jesuits for their belief in a universal natural law as existing irrespective of God’s will. Rights were ‘natural,’ not a mere human invention, according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712– 1778). But Rousseau denied the Enlightenment’s assumption of continuous progress for humanity even though the scientific advances of the time seemed to be smoothly reinforcing the idea.

Thinkers like John Milton, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Baruch Spinoza pioneered the social ideas that are based on modern ethical values...

Peace among countries began to seem more and more attainable.

Capitalism and Colonialism

Geographic discoveries of the 15th and 16th centuries enriched Europe and advanced a new relativist and cosmopolitan outlook.

The costs to the indigenous peoples of the Americas and Australia, as well as the profits that Britain was collecting by the 1760s as the leader in the slave trade (some 12 million displaced Africans) as well as the owner of the West Indian plantations, all financed the Industrial Revolution. The rise of capitalism in Europe fueled the Atlantic slave trade to a level that was previously unknown. But in the Arab world, the slave trade had been going on since

the time of the Roman Empire and lasted more than a millennium until the late 19th century; it stretched from Western Africa across the Indian Ocean and was unsurpassed in brutality toward countless millions of captured Africans. In the Mediterranean, over three million Europeans had also been enslaved by Islamic Barbary pirates from the 15th to 17th centuries; one of them was Miguel de Cervantes (1547– 1616).

On the uniqueness of the West, Harris Lee writes:

The material and historical conditions for the creation of popular cultures of reason have been the domination of the social order by the middle class and the imposition of their own particular values upon the rest of society. Wherever this stage has not occurred... no popular culture of reason has been able to emerge... And the odds against this happening even once were

astounding – a fact that we must always remember whenever we think about the uniqueness... of the West.¹⁰

Why did it happen in the West? In the opinion of Harari:

The Chinese and Persian did not lack technological inventions such as steam engines... They lacked the values, myths, judicial apparatus and sociopolitical structures that took centuries to form and mature in the

West and which could not be copied and internalized quickly. What potential did Europe develop in the early modern period that enabled it to dominate the late modern world?... [It was] modern science and capitalism.¹

Humanism

The year 2016 marked the 500th anniversary of Thomas More's book *Utopia*, referred to by historian J.A. Scott in his introduction as "perhaps the greatest of the Humanists' many reform tracts."¹¹

The idea of natural law underlay modern democratic development and became the nucleus of modern humanism. By the end of the 19th century, the term 'humanism' was widely accepted. The fundamental ontological problem of whether reality exists has been approached through many different avenues: humans have tried realism or idealism (only ideas really exist); atheism and theism, in turn branching into monism (the world is one) and dualism (the world is an eternal struggle between Good and Evil); opposing them all is humanism (there is no supernatural power, humanity is central).

As Harari put it, in medieval Europe, the chief formula for knowledge was *knowledge = scriptures x logic*. The Scientific Revolution proposed a formula: *knowledge = empirical data x mathematics*. Humanism's proposal

The idea of natural law underlay modern democratic development and became the nucleus of modern humanism. By the end of the 19th century, the term 'humanism' was widely accepted.

for attaining ethical wisdom is: *knowledge = experiences x sensitivity*.¹²

Capitalism did make an important contribution to global harmony by encouraging people [to accept that] your profit is also my profit [rather than my loss]. This has probably helped global harmony far more than centuries of Christian preaching about loving your neighbour and turning the other cheek... [In] the long run capitalism has not only managed to prevail, but also to overcome famines, plague and wars...

[But] if everything is for sale, including the courts and the police, trust evaporates, credit vanishes and business withers. What, then, rescued modern society from collapse? Humankind was salvaged not by the law of supply and demand, but rather by the rise of a new revolutionary religion – humanism... [Humans] are the ultimate source of meaning, and our free will is therefore the highest authority...

Humanism thus sees life as a gradual process of inner change, leading from ignorance to enlightenment by means of experiences... Wilhelm von Humboldt... said that the aim of existence is a “distillation of the widest possible experience of life into wisdom.” He also wrote that “there is only one summit in life – to have taken the measure in feeling of everything human.” This could well be the humanist motto.¹²

Or in Winnie the Pooh’s words, “Life is a journey to be experienced, not a problem to be solved.”

Outside The West

There has never as yet been anything outside the West equivalent to the Western reason- and evidence-based Renaissance/Reformation movements or to the Industrial Revolution and rise of the middle class. Yet progress was not exclusive to the Christian West. The spread of Islam in the 7th to 12th centuries in Asia was progressive to the extent of unifying the warring tribes through monotheism; it accelerated the exchange of trade, knowledge and culture. Bernard Lewis, an expert on Islam, submits:

Equality among believers was a basic principle of Islam from its foundation in the 7th century, in marked contrast to both the caste system of India to the east and the privileged aristocracies of the Christian world to the west. Islam really did insist on equality and achieved a high measure of success in enforcing it. ...

Three exceptions to the Islamic rule of equality were enshrined in the holy law: the inferiority of slaves, women, and unbelievers.¹³

Islam at the time was progressive even for women: for instance, it gave them at least some inheritance rights ahead of Europe.

For the first five centuries of its history, the Islamic world was known for its religious tolerance as compared to medieval Europe. Medicine, astronomy, mathematics, poetry and architecture blossomed in Islamic Andalusia and Persia. A Persian thinker, Al-Biruni (973–1048), was a founder of comparative theology as well as a mathematician, astronomer and historian. The *Canon of Medicine* of the Persian Avicenna (980–1037) was re-published more than thirty-five times in the 15th and 16th centuries alone. A school of Islamic theology based on reason and rational thought, called Mu’tazilla, flourished in the cities of Basra and Baghdad in the 8th to 10th centuries.

However, since the 11th to 13th centuries, the Sunni Ulema began banning independent reasoning. Scholars blame anti-rationalist movements such as the Ash’ari school (heavily influenced by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, 1058–1111) which defeated the Mu’tazilla school. By the 15th century, radical tribal Islam officially declared that from then on “the gates of independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) are closed.” This was particularly detrimental for the Sunni as they have had no official clergy. For the Shia, their imams could somewhat attenuate the ban through a minimal interpretation of Allah’s word now and again; this has remained their traditional historical privilege.

Right up to our times, the Islamic world suffers the grave consequences of closing the gates of *ijtihad* in terms of social, political and economic backwardness. Maajid Nawaz, a British politician, submits:

Islamism and jihadism are politicized contemporary readings of Islam and jihad... Islamism is the desire... to enforce a version of shariah as the law on the rest of the world... [it is] theocratic extremism. A jihadist is an Islamist who attempts to do so by force... Jihadist terrorism is the use of force that targets civilians to spread Islamism.¹⁴

Summing Up

What baggage does the world bring to the threshold of modernity? Mishra put it well:

A religious or medieval society was one in which the social, political and economic order seemed unchangeable, and the poor and the oppressed attributed their suffering either to fortuitous happening – ill luck, bad health, unjust rulers – or to the will of God. The idea that suffering could be relieved, and happiness engineered, by men radically changing the social order belongs to the eighteenth century.

The ambitious philosophers of the Enlightenment brought forth the idea of a perfectible society – a Heaven on Earth rather than in the afterlife. It was taken up vigorously by the French revolutionaries... before turning [it] into the new political religion of the 19th century...

[M]any Anglo-American assumptions, derived from a unique and unrepeatable historical experience, are an unreliable guide to today's chaos... [There is] ...the belief that Anglo-American institutions of the nation state and liberal democracy will be gradually generalized around the world; the aspiring middle classes created by industrial capitalism will bring about accountable, representative and stable governments; religion would give way to secularism; rational human beings would defeat the forces of irrationalism – that every society, in short, is destined to evolve just as a handful of countries in the West sometimes did...

In the late nineteenth century, European and Japanese ruling classes began to respond to the damage and disruptions of the world market by... creating new fables of ethnic and religious solidarity, and deploying militaristic nationalism in what they claimed was a struggle for existence. In the first half of the twentieth century it wasn't just Nazis and Fascists who embraced... the theories of Social Darwinism. Support for them extended across Europe and America...and Turkey, India, and China.

By the 1940s, competitive nationalisms in Europe stood implicated in the most barbaric wars and crimes against religious and ethnic minorities witnessed in human history. It was only after the Second World War that European countries were forced, largely by American economic and military power, to imagine less antagonistic political and economic relations, which eventually resulted in decolonization and the European Union.⁹

This will be the topic of the third and final part of this series, entitled “Western Civilization in Modernity.”

References

1. Harari, Yuval N. *Sapiens*. McClelland and Stewart. 2015.
2. Sacks, Jonathan. *Renewable Energy*. The Times of Israel, January 21, 2016.
3. Cahill, Thomas. *The Gifts of the Jews*. Doubleday. 1998.
4. Koestler, Arthur. *The Sleepwalkers*. Hutchinson. 1968.
5. Cohn, Norman. *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. Harper Torchbooks. 1961.
6. Dulesh, Sophie. *Cradle of Western Civilization*. *Humanist Perspectives* 50(1):10-21, 2017 (Issue #200).
7. Hegel, Georg W.F. *The Philosophy of History*. Dover Publications. 1956.
8. Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Free Press. 2006.
9. Mishra, Pankaj. *Age of Anger. A History of the Present*. Farrar. 2017.
10. Harris, Lee. *The Suicide of Reason*. Basic Books. 2007.
11. Marshall, Peter K. *Thomas More; Utopia*. Washington Square Press. 1974.
12. Harari, Yuval N. *Homo Deus*. McClelland and Stewart. 2016.
13. Lewis, Bernard. *What Went Wrong?* Oxford University Press, USA. 2002.
14. Harris, Sam and Maajid Nawaz. *Islam and the Future of Tolerance*. Harvard University Press. 2015.

Russian-born **Sophie Dulesh** obtained her medical degrees (MD, PhD, Dr Sci) in Moscow and worked for 27 years as a medical doctor and researcher in Russia before immigrating to Canada with her family in 1980, where she worked as an MD for another 23 years. Sophie is a secular humanist and is interested in philosophy and the history of religion. She is the author of two books and many articles on medical research in Russian, and has also written short stories and non-fiction books in English, including *The Trouble with Religion* and *My Red Russia*.