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# **CIVILIZATION AND THE QUEST FOR CREATIVE SYNTHESIS: BETWEEN A GLOBAL DR. JEKYLL AND A GLOBAL MR. HYDE**

**by Ali A. Mazrui**

**Director, Institute of Global Cultural Studies  
and  
Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities  
Binghamton University  
State University of New York at Binghamton, New York, USA**

**Albert Luthuli Professor-at-Large  
University of Jos, Jos, Nigeria**

**Andrew D. White Professor-at-Large Emeritus  
and Senior Scholar In Africana Studies  
Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA**

**President  
Association of Muslim Social Scientists of North America (AMSS)  
Washington, D.C., USA**

**Senior Fellow  
Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding  
Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.**

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## ***Preamble***

Asia is the genesis of all great world religions – from Hinduism to Islam. Europe is the cradle of all great global ideologies – including liberalism, socialism, capitalism, and nationalism. In Turkey there continues to be a struggle between the spiritual values of Asia and the material aspirations of Europe.

In artistic matters, civilization has been the pursuit of *elegance*. In intellectual matters, civilization has been the pursuit of *enlightenment*. Elegance produces great paintings, sculpture, music and architecture. Enlightenment produces great philosophy and scripture. At its best the Ottoman Empire struck a balance between the beauty of elegance and the profundity of enlightenment.

But every civilization has its own “Dr. Jekyll” (the good face of the culture) and its own “Mr. Hyde” (the negative visage of the culture). Both Islam and the Western civilization today are at the crossroads between excessive militarism (the global Mr. Hyde) and a readiness to learn from others (the global Dr. Jekyll).

Both Islam and the West were at their best when they were prepared to learn from each other (creative synthesis). The gates of mutual borrowing were then closed. Is it time to reopen the gates of creative synthesis?

## **The Jekyll – Hyde Global Equation**

Robert Louis Stevenson’s novel, The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was first published in 1886. The central moral thesis of the novel was that every human being had great potential for both good and evil. Something can tilt the balance to make the person either a good citizen or a social misfit.

We do know that the environment in which a child grows up can help to ensure either good citizenship or a future social deviant. The environment can tilt the balance.

What Stevenson's novel asserts is that science too can tilt the balance. The brilliant Dr. Jekyll uses his laboratory to seek a chemical formula that would, from time to time, separate the good citizen in himself from the psychopath.

In this paper we take the argument further. Just as in every single individual there is both latent good and latent evil, so in every civilization there is a constant struggle between the forces of good and the powers of evil.

Our focus in this paper is firstly on Western civilization; we shall then move on to an examination of Islamic civilization. Western civilization has certainly reached the dazzling heights of both human achievement and human compassion.

However, the same Western civilization has in recent centuries perpetrated more wars, at greater human cost, than any other states have. The civilization which produced ways of saving human lives has also manifested a blood-dripping record. The Northern hemisphere has both invented and used worse and worse ways of destroying human beings.

The West in the modern period has shown great power for good and great power for evil. From the point of view of relations between peoples and continents, the United Nations has been a whistle-blower against different legacies of the Global Mr. Hyde. The world body has been part of the vanguard against colonialism and apartheid. European culture has produced both (a) some of the worst forms of racism in modern history (b) some of the best forms of charity.

The worst forms of racism led by the North have included.

- (a) The large-scale trans-Atlantic African slave trade, often encouraged by the Church in order to save Native Americans at the expense of Black Africans.
- (b) The rise of Nazism and Fascism in Christian Europe — and the silences of the Church towards those trends.
- (c) The establishment and consolidation of apartheid — often in the name of the Old Testament of the Bible.

But while Euro-Christians scored high in the history of modern racism, they have also scored high in the history of modern charity and benevolence.

Of all the religions of the world, Christian missions and Christian organizations have had the most extensive networks of charitable and benevolent activities.

- Christian aid workers are the first to arrive at foreign earthquakes.
- The first to organize relief for foreign famines.
- The first to extend a hand to foreign refugees (although their governments may be less enthusiastic about refugees)
- The first with free medicine, free food, new clinics in poor countries.

The Christianized Northern hemisphere has been at once the most racist in modern history and the most charitable.

Some Christian racists are not charitable at all; while some charitable Christians are not racist at all. The office of Secretary-General of the UN has disproportionately been held by Christians. The world body still awaits a Hindu, Jewish, Confucian or Muslim Secretary-General.

Of the original five official languages of the UN, four were European (English, French, Russian, Spanish). Arabic was later partially promoted for select U.N. functions.

Nevertheless, the world body has had spectacular Chief Executives – from Tryve Lee and Dag Hammarskjold to Boutros-Ghali and Kofi Annan.

There is a third category of Christians — those who are at once racist and charitable, at once colour-prejudiced and benevolent. Benevolent racism emerges out of this third category. Albert Schweitzer was a benevolent racist. Thomas Jefferson owned slaves. Why is the white world at once the most racist and the most benevolent in modern history?

<b>THE MALIGNANT NORTH GLOBAL MR. HYDE</b>	<b>THE BENEVOLENT NORTH GLOBAL DR. JEKYLL</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Western <u>capitalism</u> and the ideology of greed: mother of liberal democracy and mother of imperialism.</li> <li>2. Western <u>technology</u> and the corrupting tendency of power.</li> <li>3. Western <u>nationalism</u>, the nation-state and the transition to racism</li> <li>4. Western <u>secularism</u> and the search for alternative forms of solidarity (e.g. Euro-solidarity)</li> <li>5. White <u>mobility</u> and the adversarial encounters with other cultures.</li> <li>6. The <u>nation-state</u>: mother of patriotism and self-sacrifice and mother of <u>war</u>.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The example of <u>Jesus</u> and service among the poor and the sick.</li> <li>2. Christian service as a strategy of conversion: from clinic to confession, from school to salvation.</li> <li>3. Rise of Western <u>liberal humanitarianism</u> in the West: Oxfam, Red Cross.</li> <li>4. Rise of <u>liberal democracy</u>; Rise of <u>Euro-socialism</u> and other left wing movements: the younger Marx and idealism.</li> <li>5. <u>Euro-globalism</u>: Discourse on world order &amp; global concerns.</li> <li>6. <u>Euro-environmentalism</u>: Planet Earth is One</li> </ol>

More recently one branch and version of Western civilization ended the evil of the world war (World War II) by using the war's most evil weapons — the atomic bomb. The invention of these weapons by the Northern hemisphere, and their use in August

1945 changed forever the nature of potential warfare. Once again Western civilization has embodied the legacies of both the Global Mr. Hyde and the Global Dr. Jekyll.

Of the five vetoes on the Security Council, four are cast by white majority countries: Britain, France, Russia and the United States. Permanent members of the Security Council are disproportionately Christian – four out of five. Official UN languages are heavily Eurocentric – English, French, Russian, Spanish – Chinese was later followed by Arabic. And yet the specialized agencies of the UN protect for humanity aspects of the Ottoman heritage, a street in Zanzibar, the cuisine of France and Chinese acupuncture. Some of these are intangible legacies.

### **The Pursuit of Civilization?**

The British philosopher, Bertrand Russell, used to argue that civilization was born out of the pursuit of luxury. Russell's sense of "civilization" envisaged a world of great works of art, stupendous music, great architecture and palaces, and a lifestyle of elegance and good manners. It was "civilization" in that luxurious sense which produced Louis XIV's palace at Versailles in France and Al-Hamra in Muslim Spain, the towering voices of Saigal and Umm Kulthum, the paintings of Mikhail Angelo, and the marble poetry of the Taj Mahal. Mozart, Beethoven, Shakespeare, Tagore and Iqbal are part of that package of civilized elegance. So were the mosques and palaces of Istanbul.

Muslims in history have been not only among the consumers of such civilized elegance; they have also been among the major producers in the past. Indeed, Muslims have on occasions led the way in the pursuit of luxury – going as far back as the era of the Abbassid King Haroon el Rashid. For short, we should view this conceptualization of "civilization" more politely as the pursuit of elegance rather than luxury.

But when the Prophet Muhammad was born in the year 570 of our common era, Mecca as the city of his birth was a dusty trading center. Arab culture was still more of a culture of tents and camels than of palaces and elegance. It was inconceivable that the birth of little Muhammad, son of Abd Allah, grandson of Adel Mutallib would presage the birth of a whole new civilization.

In any case, was the civilization which was being inaugurated by Muhammad's birth intended to flow out of what Russell much later called "the pursuit of luxury"? This brings us to a different conceptualization of the growth and development of a civilization. Under this second definition, "civilization is born not out of the pursuit of either luxury or elegance but out of the quest for enlightenment."

### **Elegance Versus Enlightenment**

Our thesis in this presentation is that Islam began as a Gospel of Enlightenment. The shift from the quest for enlightenment to the pursuit of elegance occurred after the assassination of Ali bin Abu Talib, the fourth Caliph of Islam and the first Imam of Shia Islam. In other words, during the Prophet Muhammad's own lifetime as a self conscious Messenger of God (1610-1632) and during the lives of Caliphs Abubakar, Umar, Uthman and Ali, Islam emphasized enlightenment and egalitarianism. The pursuit of elegance and luxury began to escalate when Islam went dynastic under the Umayyads (661–749 C.E.) and later the Abbasids (749 to end of 10<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) These two dynasties inaugurated the Royalization of Islam, the establishment of hereditary monarchies, the consolidation of new aristocracies, and the evolution of much more hierarchical relations between men and women than was evident in earlier Islam. Was Mr. Hyde emerging? The Muslim ummah began to have not just the Caliph, but also Sultans, Kings and regal

emirates (especially from the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) The elegance of the Umayyads and Abbasids later culminated in the splendour of the Ottoman Empire – the final imperial dynasty of Muslim history.

But on what basis do we draw the conclusion that the fountain of Islamic civilization was intended to be the quest for enlightenment rather than the pursuit of elegance or luxury? It began with the absolutely first command which Muhammad received from the Angel Gabriel in the solitude of Mt. Hira. Perhaps never in the history of revealed religion had a prophet been ordered first and foremost not to go on his knees and worship, nor to raise his arms to heaven and supplicate, nor to burst into a hymn of praise to God. The first command from God to Muhammad through Gabriel was: **Iqra!** This means “Read!”

1. Read!  
In the name  
Of thy Lord  
Who created
2. Created man, out of  
A leech-like clot:
3. Read. And thy Lord  
Is most bountiful –
4. He who taught  
The use of the Pen –
5. Taught man that  
Which he knew not<sup>i</sup>

*Iqra bismi Rabbika ladhii khalaq  
Khalaq el Insana min alaq  
Iqra wa Rabbuka al akram  
Alladhii allama bil qalam  
Allama el Insana maa lam yaalam*



The Prophet Muhammad protested to Gabriel that the prophet himself could neither read nor write. Muhammad rushed home to his wife, shaking with a kind of fever, and pleading to Khadijah “Cover me! Cover me!” Muhammad did not realize that the imperative Iqra which continued to echo in his memory was the beginning of a book which was eventually destined to become the most widely read book in its original language in human history. [The Christian Bible is the most widely read book in translation].

When Muhammad was commanded Iqra (read), the idea was not that Muslims should just read the Qur’an itself. Millions of Muslims in subsequent generations have interpreted that the only book worth reading was the Qur’an itself. But Gabriel referred to how God had taught humans bil qalam (by the pen). Yet the Qur’an was revealed orally to the Prophet, and not by the pen. Therefore, God was drawing the attention of Muslims to the great wide-ranging literature of the libraries of the world.

Fortunately, the evolution of Islamic civilization was not diverted permanently from a quest for enlightenment to the pursuit of elegance and luxury. The dynasty of Abbasids especially tried to combine enlightenment with elegance. The zenith of the power of the Abbasids was reached under the Caliphate of Haroon al Rashid (786–809 C.E.) – the nearest Muslim equivalent to the Sun-King of France, Louis XIV, the Caliph Haroon was a patron of the arts, sciences and scholarship. Future Sultans of the Ottoman Empire also approximated Versailles. Theology and the study of the sunnah and ahadith laid firmer foundations for the evolving Islamic jurisprudence and the Shariah. The study of the Qur’an became a science as well as a textual discipline.

There were ahadith (sayings) of the Prophet Muhammad which continued to expand on the meaning of the imperative Iqra. There was even a Prophet's injunction calling upon believers to "*seek knowledge even as far as China*". Certainly in subsequent centuries Muslim attitudes to *ilm* [knowledge] displayed a healthy readiness to learn from other cultures and civilizations. Muslims were ready to learn new forms of architecture and literature from the Persians, translate philosophical texts from the ancient Greeks, learn astronomy from the ancient Egyptians, and dabble with mathematics alongside the cultures of India.

Whether or not the Arabs and Indians jointly discovered the zero and inaugurated the metric system, we know that the numerals which Canadians, Americans and Western Europeans use today continue to be called "Arabic numerals".

We also realize that words like the following which exist today in the English language are in fact loan words from the Arabic language either directly or through Ottoman Turkish:

*Algebra, average, amalgam, cable, rocket, atlas, cipher, chemistry, algorithm, zenith, drug, tariff and [ironically] alcohol.*

### **Human Genius and Islamic Civilization**

Civilization as a quest for enlightenment, on the one hand, and as pursuit of elegance and luxury, on the other hand, continued to co-exist in the unfolding expansion of Islam. In the quest for enlightenment many of the carriers and consultants of Islamic science were indeed Arabized Jews. As historians like W. Montgomery Watt have reminded us,

...in the early twelfth century a Jewish mathematician in Barcelona, Abraham bar-Hiyya ha-Nasi, often known as Savasorda, had begun translating Arabic

scientific works into Hebrew and writing original treaties in that language. These Hebrew works played an important part in the transmission to Europe of the Arabic scientific heritage.<sup>ii</sup>

Those very first verses of the Qur'an had emphasized how God taught the human species what the species had not known before. Islam later became part of the history of Western astronomy and Western mathematics, subsequently the Ottomans became both teachers of others and disciples of other civilizations. The Ottoman Empire with its millett system was fundamentally ecumenical, rather than secular. Ottomans respected religious diversity.

Although the computer is new, its genesis includes the early years of Indian mathematics and Arabic numerals. The taming of energy and space exploration in the twentieth century had few Muslim physicists involved, but it is worth remembering that words like rocket, cable, arsenal, zenith and nadir are of Muslim derivation.

Towering Muslim scholars in world history have included *Ibn Rushd* better known to Westerners as Averroes (1126–1198 C.E.). He was a confirmed Aristotlean, and an early convert to the proposition that the world was round. Among great religious philosophers were figures like Ibn al Haythan al Hazen and Nasr al Din Tusi.

Even more influential in the history of Western science was *Ibn Sina* better known to Westerners as Avicenna (980–1037 C.E.) with his commentaries on Greek thinkers. He introduced many Western Europeans to the heritage of ancient Greece. However, Ibn Sina's most influential work was his book, *The Canon of Medicine*. It has been described as the most influential medical reference book in European Universities right into the 17<sup>th</sup> Century C.E.

In the social sciences Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406 C.E.) was unequalled as a genius in the historical method. His greatest work *Al Muqaddimah* has been described as follows by the British macro-historian Arnold J. Toynbee:

Undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever been created by any mind in any time or place.....the most comprehensive and illuminating analysis of how human affairs work that has been made anywhere.<sup>iii</sup>

The Qur’anic legacy of *Iqra* was opening up fresh frontiers as Muslim scholars built newer and newer layers of knowledge. As Gabriel said to Muhammad a few centuries earlier!

*Read! And thy Lord  
Is Most Bountiful;*

*He who taught by  
(The use of) the Pen;*

*Taught man that  
Which he knew not.*

There followed later the slow decline of Islamic civilization as a quest for enlightenment – while the pursuit of luxury continued in less constructive ways. The Muslim Dr. Jekyll was threatened by a new Mr. Hyde. One cause of Muslim decline was political – as Muslim empires and emirates fragmented into diverse city-states and smaller and smaller dynasties.

A second major reason of Muslim decline was the fossilization of doctrine, as Muslims became less and less receptive to knowledge generated by non-Muslims. The old intellectual effervescence had welcomed creative cross cultural synthesis – learning from Persia, Greece, India, Egypt and from Arabized Jews.

Although the doors of idjtihaad (judicial review) were not formally closed by a legal fatwa, in reality Muslim scholars became increasingly resistant to revised interpretations of Islamic dogma. In the English language the word “innovation” has positive connotations, but in Arabic the sister-word “bid’a” has strong negative implications. New generations of Muslims fiercely resisted fresh doctrinal perspectives as threats to ancestral authenticity of dogma. Islamic knowledge became fossilized in rigid legalisms of what is permitted (halal), forbidden (haram), encouraged (sunna) or legally discouraged (makruh). The new Mr. Hyde was combating the old Dr. Jekyll of *Iqra bismi Rabbika al-ladhii Khalaq.*

## **Conclusion**

If Asia is the mother of all great world religions, and Europe is the mother of all great global ideologies, what are the implications for Turkey? After all, Turkey is both Asian and European?

Turkey has become the experimental laboratory testing the balance between the spiritual values of the East and the worldly aspirations of the West. While the Ottomans had experimented with an ecumenical empire of relative religious tolerance, the Turkish Republic has struggled with a secular state in which the military is paradoxically the defender of democracy, and the mosque is the defender of the faith.

If civilization is a combination of artistic elegance and intellectual enlightenment, the Ottoman Empire contributed more to the elegance of the Turkish heritage; the Turkish Republic has contributed more to secular enlightenments of modern Turkey. Turkish civilization is still a work in progress – synthesizing the elegance of the past with the enlightenment of the future. Both Jekyll and Hyde have sought supremacy in Turkey.

Bertrand Russell was oversimplifying when he defined civilization as the pursuit of luxury. Much closer to the truth is what Turkey has been trying to demonstrate – civilization is the pursuit of creative synthesis, a culture of learning and teaching, a struggle for the right balance between the spiritual values of the East and the secular aspirations of the Western heritage.

Yes, Turkey is a great work in progress, ultimately in the custody of the Turkish people themselves. The struggle continues.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Surat Iqra or Al-Alaq: Verses 1 to 5 of this Sura were the first direct Revelation to the Prophet Muhammad

<sup>ii</sup> Montgomery Watt, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe: Islamic Survey No. 9* (Edinburgh, Scotland, 1972)

<sup>iii</sup> Quoted from The Observer (London). See back cover of Ibn Khaldun, The Muqaddimah An Introduction to History, translated from the Arabic by Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989 reprint).