

# Civilization as dialogue: Spirituality and philosophy in Mullā Ṣadrā and today

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# Civilization *as* Dialogue: Spirituality and Philosophy in Mullā Ṣadrā and Today

... and every Day He is in a (new) Affair (55:29)

*James W. Morris*

**I**n the domains of ethics and spirituality, at least, Civilization is always an invisible balancing act, a tenuous and fragile, truly providential achievement. Justice and inner harmony (*'adl* and *i'tidāl*) are always dynamic, living realities, born out of all the unavoidable, recurrent conflicts and challenges of both human and external nature. And this is equally true in any setting: from each soul, through the family, on to all the more complex social and cultural forms of human community.

Not surprisingly, many people speak casually of 'Civilization' without really thinking through what that term implies. One common dimension to those mysterious historical phenomena we most often identify as Civilizations is the central role and ongoing interplay of two equally essential elements. The first is the development of an adequately all-encompassing, living spiritual and religious dimension that comes to be shared by many different cultures. The second is those gradually accumulated symbolic and moral worlds of thought, culture and the arts which together articulate and integrate, balance, and subtly illuminate those recurrent conflicting human tendencies and strivings. In that sense, each true Civilization in fact comes to be and is maintained through dialogue—but only through genuine, necessarily inclusive dialogue. And equally, Civilization in that spiritual sense immediately breaks down whenever that foundational dialogue disappears—something which can and does repeatedly happen, for a host of all too familiar reasons. Again, if my speaking of 'Civilization' here seems too remote and abstract, we have all witnessed the detailed functioning of these same underlying

realities and spiritual laws in the internal dynamics of marriage, or of true friendship.

So whenever the essential conditions for that dialogue which *is* Civilization disappear, then philosophy (the intrinsically dialogical quest for wisdom) and *adab*, those 'humanities' that are the constantly creative expression of living philosophy and spirituality, immediately fall prey to one of two recurrent dangers. Either of scholasticism, of a mysterious 'fossilisation' due to their separation from their living spiritual roots. Or else of ideologisation, of all the familiar forms of political mythology and magical thinking, as genuine dialogue and philosophy decays—or is betrayed—into a hollow, illusory, self-destructive justification for all the familiar forms of basharic domination (of *riyāsa*). Quite tellingly, whatever problems we might have in defining Civilization, no one really has any trouble recognising either of those classic *failures* of Civilization, in all their manifold and all-too-familiar forms.

So against the backdrop of that age-old drama, which has played itself out again and again through the foundational dialogues of every earlier Civilization, it is especially instructive to regard the example of Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophy, in relation to both his predecessors and his epigons. What lessons can we draw from the fruitful example of the ongoing dialogue between Mullā Ṣadrā and all his peers, his spiritual colleagues (*ham-kārān*) from the wider Islamic heritage? Or more specifically, what central human problems do those master philosophers continue to illuminate, at the heart of that gradually emerging 'science of spirituality' which is one of the most pressing philosophical facets of our ongoing task of constructing a renewed and necessarily global Civilization?

Today's discussion falls into three parts. First, a short preliminary clarification of what we mean specifically by 'Civilization' in this particular context (as contrasted with cultures and other equally legitimate usages of the word 'Civilization' in other settings). Secondly, a brief outline of some of the indispensable elements or pre-conditions for that dialogue which underpins any living Civilization. Then we move on to the way those essential elements are illustrated in the works of Mullā Ṣadrā and other pioneering creators and sustainers of that remarkable Islamic Civilization which came into being and spread throughout so much of Asia in the post-Mongol period. Finally, and even more briefly, we allude to some of the wider challenges facing any possible continuation or active renewal of Ṣadrā's civilizational project today.

## I. Clarifying our references: 'Civilization' and culture

In English and other European languages, the term 'Civilization'—and the equally problematic 'culture'—have been and still are used in so many quite different ways that we cannot avoid some preliminary clarification. (The terminological situation today in Persian or Arabic is certainly no less confusing.) Simply for the very particular purposes of this discussion and this Congress, we

must explain at the outset that we are not concerned here with such common usages of that term as those referring to a certain remarkable historical level of scientific, technological, or artistic accomplishment, or of relative economic or social organisation and achievement (of *tamaddun* or *'imrān*, in the language of an Ibn Khaldun, for example). Nor are we using 'Civilization' here as simply another synonym for cultures—indeed quite the contrary. For to paraphrase Aristotle's famous remarks in his *Politics*, people everywhere, in *any* time or place, are intrinsically and unavoidably 'cultural' beings, necessarily living within a multitude of local cultures necessarily shaped and defined by the particular shifting factors of language, natural environment, material culture, historical heritage, and the specific sets of aims and intentions favoured by each culture. Whatever defining factors we might select or emphasise, no one would have much trouble describing and identifying the characteristics of any specific culture.

In contrast, we are using 'Civilization' here to refer to a unique reality that is historically rare, fragile, and mysterious, in a sense that is quite intentionally and unapologetically 'value-based': i.e., to refer to the construction of an effective moral, intellectual and spiritual framework which momentarily creates the *conditions for ongoing dialogue*, for a kind of shared 'spiritual homeland' (*mawṭin*), within which people from very different regional cultures and linguistic communities can converse and create together.<sup>1</sup> Historically speaking, observers speaking of 'Civilizations' in this particular sense have tended to identify them by reference to particular common sacred languages, scriptures, and learned elites. Yet while such incidental external factors might possibly be included among the necessary conditions for the creation of a lasting Civilization, they are even more obviously not sufficient causes in themselves—shared as they also are, in each case, by a large number of disparate, often warring cultures and barbarisms.

Such considerations help to highlight the basic fact that Civilizations in this particular trans-cultural sense—like other spiritual realities—are intrinsically *living realities*, created, shaped and sustained by individuals of rare creativity and sensitivity. From this particular standpoint, what is essential for each great Civilization, and what is thus normally characteristic of each of the central texts and interpretive traditions associated with that Civilization, is a comprehensive, fully inclusive and inherently dynamic spiritual understanding of all the elements and processes of human perfection or realisation (*kamāl al-insān*). Indeed, each of those rare true Civilizations that we can identify in this sense—as opposed to the endless cultures, tribes, and peoples manifesting the manifold possibilities of basharic ('human-animal') existence—could be simply described as the potential 'home of the true humanity': *dār al-kamāl*, or *dār al-insān*. And by its very nature, that reality—whose living expression is the equally untranslatable mystery of *adab* and *ihsān*—cannot be externally defined or delimited. What we can describe in every case, though, are some of the essential preconditions for dialogue, for that foundational *seeking* on which the very possibility and the eventual mysterious creation of each Civilization depends.

## II. The conditions for dialogue: freedom, creativity, diversity and tolerance

While we can all witness and study retrospectively the disintegration, decadence and shattering of the rare Civilizations of the past, it is surely significant that the essential creative moments in the forging of each great Civilization, like the unique manifestations of true genius in all its forms, remain essentially mysterious. Historically, what remains and what people point to, of course, are the handful of prophets, *awliyā* ('Friends of God'), and other creative figures whose masterworks and influences eventually—but usually much later—gradually became identified with the spiritual achievements and identity of each Civilization. Yet just as with the parable of the sower (Qur'an 48:29), the actual lasting influences of those seminal creative figures in fact remain utterly dependent on the far more complex and mysterious realities of their 'seedbed': that is to say, on *the slow creative forging of new symbols, ideals, and forms of dialogue and communication providentially shared across the boundaries of many different languages and cultures*, a mysterious process that necessarily always occurs 'from the bottom up', almost invisible precisely to those most immediately involved in it—just as we can still see happening all around us today.

Fortunately, the actual conditions for that dialogue which is so indispensable to the forging of Civilization, to the transcendence of the usual boundaries of each culture and linguistic community, are not mysterious or hidden at all. That foundational dialogue, anywhere and at any time, depends on four quintessentially human (*insānī*) qualities, characteristics which were, of course, key elements in the creation of classical Islamic Civilization. These four defining preconditions and qualities of true human being—which are so beautifully described in the Sura *al-ʿAsr* (Qur'an 103)<sup>2</sup>—form a kind of ascending cycle or spiralling expression of the spirit (*mi'rāj al-rūḥ*), in which the actual realization of any one of these elements makes possible, but also in some respects presupposes, each of the other three. For like so many metaphysical realities, it is easy enough to list or discuss these conditions for dialogue and Civilization abstractly; while it is something radically different and far more challenging to transform them daily into living realities, into actualized virtues within the given social and political dimensions and challenges of each culture. Yet what we can say with confidence is that without any one of these four qualities, no real trans-cultural dialogue—and a fortiori, no real Civilization—is even possible.

• The first precondition for inter-cultural dialogue and realised humanity is *freedom*, in the comprehensive sense of rational, clear-sighted choice (*irāda*); corresponding moral action; and effective responsibility for its consequences and for that reflection and deciphering of the resulting life-lessons which are only possible within that entire 'learning-cycle' of freedom. Without all those indispensable elements of freedom, of course, there is no real moral responsibility, no genuine choice, and no spiritual learning or realisation—and thus no possibility of realised humanity. Or in the straightforwardly incontrovertible observation of the Qur'an: *lā*

*ikrāha fi al-dīn*.<sup>3</sup> There is simply no substitute for the unavoidable lifelong processes of spiritual learning, experimentation, and refining trial-and-error that underlie the slow attainment of each of the universal degrees and realities of true faith: that is, of *imān*, as opposed to the facile public ideologies and untested suppositions of each culture's and individual's limited, largely unconscious governing belief-systems, their *i'tiqād*. The ultimate fruit of this real, actualised freedom and choice—whether or not it attains the kind of collective, historically enduring 'critical mass' needed to become outwardly visible in an enduring Civilization—is spiritual assurance or knowing 'faith' (*yaqīn*, *imān*, and 'ilm in its root Qur'anic sense), which everywhere includes the inner recognition, the inspired direct knowing, of that *natural hierarchy*—that 'sacred spiritual order'—which intrinsically informs all expressions of spirit, both in nature and human beings.

- The natural and inseparable consequence of actual human freedom is *realised creativity*, the most intrinsic and self-evident quality of the Spirit (*rūḥ*) in all its manifestations. In the language of the Sura *al-'Asr*, these are the accomplished, ongoing actions of *ṣāliḥāt*, those truly 'fitting' and appropriately transforming expressions of spiritual insight which—like that universal divine 'Activity' (*sha'n*) in our opening verse (55:29)—are necessarily 'new' and creative within each particular situation. And this open-ended creative capacity for the effective realisation of our true humanity is in reality inseparable from a profound, experientially grounded knowing of *all* the dimensions, conditions and consequences of our actions and intention. Or in the language of the even more familiar '*ḥadīth* of Gabriel', this realised creativity is the all-encompassing virtue of *iḥsān*, that mysterious making-manifest of the divine beauty-and-good which, as the Prophet defines it in his response to Gabriel, flows from 'serving God as though you see Him'—and which reaches its earthly perfection with the effacement of the basharic ego, in each transcendent moment of 'and if you are not,....'<sup>4</sup>

- One of the most obvious conditions for genuine and lastingly constructive dialogue, and eventually for the elaboration of any Civilization—and at the same time, the inevitable natural outcome of the indispensable transformative combination of human freedom and creativity—is an ever-increasing *diversity* of both beliefs and beautiful practices. In its foundations, this indispensable (and always problematic!) creative diversity reflects in the human sphere the distinctive infinite diversity of natural endowments and capacities so evident in every other sphere of divine creation: that inimitable 'divine Colouring' and creative artistry, *sibḡat Allāh* (Qur'an 2:138). For the constantly shifting sets of spiritually individualized tests and challenges constituting our momentary earthly existence mean that the spiritually 'appropriate responses' (the true *ṣāliḥāt*) are always an ongoing *creative* process requiring ever-renewed experimentation and that distinctively human 'beautiful innovation' (*bid'a ḥasana*) that is *iḥsān*. And in its fully actualized consequences, of course, this characteristic cultural creativity and diversity which makes possible any genuine Civilization reflects that intrinsic *individuality* and individuation which is one of the most obvious outward signs and expressions of realized human 'completion' or perfection (*kamāl*).

• The fourth pre-condition for meaningful dialogue and Civilization—and again a natural consequence of each of the previously mentioned points—is the active, necessarily collective spiritual-virtue of ‘mutual recognition and cooperation in seeking and realising what is real and right, in the face of all the obstacles and impediments that creative cooperation always encounters.’ This is simply a very approximate English rendering of the incomparably more elegant and concise conclusion of the Sura *al-‘Asr: wa tawāsaw bi-l-Ḥaqq wa tawāsaw bi-l-ṣabr*. Normally in English this quintessentially civilizational reality, an absolute precondition for meaningful dialogue at every level, is popularly rendered, for peculiar historical reasons, by the rather anodyne expression ‘tolerance’—although that unsatisfying word itself is far from adequate for expressing the necessarily active, positive dimensions of this very spiritual virtue; its profoundly spiritual roots; and its necessarily cooperative human presuppositions and expressions.

To summarize, then, these are four indispensable pre-conditions—although certainly not alone sufficient ones—for dialogue, at any level, and hence for the eventual elaboration of that enduring multi-cultural dialogue we call ‘Civilization’. To begin with, the most basic prerequisites of *freedom* and reasoned choice—the fundamental spiritual dimensions of theomorphic human being, according to the Qur’an—direct our attention to the processes by which people actually grow spiritually, gradually learning from the consequences of their actions and intentions. Secondly, our fully human responsibility is only actualised through the ongoing processes of *creativity*—with the indispensable motivating role of beauty and the love it naturally inspires—and the transforming roles of those arts and spiritually effective institutions (the Islamic humanities, and their equivalents in each Civilization) through which people can actually begin to exercise and realise their potential humanity. The natural result of those twofold defining human responsibilities of freedom and creativity is the ongoing expression of a naturally increasing diversity of individualised beliefs and spiritually effective forms of right-and-beautiful action (*iḥsān*). And each of those preceding foundations naturally fosters—while again practically depending upon—the wider public understanding of the spiritual roots of creative diversity and the recognition of those unfolding practical tasks of ongoing *co-operation* (at once ethical, spiritual, aesthetic, scientific, cultural, political) which that awareness always entails.

Again, it may seem arbitrary or overly simplistic to outline so straightforwardly these essential preconditions for that transforming, constructive dialogue which ultimately is Civilization. However, that impression should quickly disappear if one simply re-reads each step in the preceding discussion while imagining what the humanly alternative positions are and have been available at each stage of that argument. Doing so is extremely illuminating, because that imaginative exercise quickly draws our attention more clearly to those perennial philosophic, theological, and practical (ethical, social and political) factors and situations of conflict, compulsion, manipulation, and constraint which are the familiar backdrop to the rare re-discovery and realisation of these higher, uniquely human potentialities.

### III. Mullā Ṣadrā and his 'colleagues' in the defence of Islamic Civilization

In this section we turn from the abstract consideration of those essential preconditions for the elaboration of a Civilization, to the revealing exploration of the extraordinary concrete historical achievements underlying the actual elaboration and safeguarding of that wider Islamic Civilization of which Ṣadrā himself was such an impassioned defender. More specifically, in a learned gathering primarily devoted to Ṣadrā's philosophy and theology—rather than to the much wider spiritual, artistic, and cultural underpinnings of his thought in the monumental Civilizational achievements of those great creative masters of the Islamic humanities, from Ibn 'Arabi to Rūmī and Ḥāfīz, who are the constant implicit reference-points of all his thought—it should be understandable that my attention here is focused specifically on the similar 'defensive' role of other key later philosophic figures from other, largely Sunni, cultural and geographic regions of later Islamic civilization.

Now most of the distinguished scholars attending this Congress are understandably accustomed to the specialised, 'microscopic' approach to studying the works of Mullā Ṣadrā—or indeed of almost any other comparable philosopher and thinker—primarily through the familiar, very focused techniques of textual, philological, doctrinal, and comparative historical analysis, tracing and highlighting the creative transformations and continuations of the ideas of earlier Islamic thinkers and traditions in the thought and literary expressions of this great figure. In this section, I would simply like to suggest a rather different, much broader (and yet complementary) set of historical and comparative perspectives which naturally arise when we look at Mullā Ṣadrā and his writings from the far wider perspective of the elaboration and sustaining of Islamic Civilization—as it were, from a kind of 'telescopic' perspective. This is a kind of thought-experiment which those professionally concerned with civilizational studies are constantly undertaking, and in this short compass I can only make at best a few comparisons and suggestions that may provoke some further useful thought and reflection on the lessons that might be drawn from this approach.

Surely one of the most remarkable and as yet little-studied phenomena in the scholarly fields of religious studies and civilizational studies is the extraordinary emergence, out of the singularly unpromising chaos and apparent disaster of the Mongol invasions (and the simultaneous Crusades and 'Reconquista'), of extraordinarily effective new expressions of Islam—both as a truly *world* religion, and as a Civilization inspiring and encompassing endlessly diverse cultures and communities throughout much of Asia and central Europe—in the centuries immediately following the initial massive cultural and human destruction of the Mongol era.<sup>5</sup> For the most part, wherever historians and related scholars have explored this extraordinary phenomenon, they have found that this remarkable Civilizational process took place not through conquest or official conversion by local rulers (which in any case would not account for the massive cultural creativity

involved in each stage and locality), but rather through a mysterious development of 'creative osmosis' in which the most outwardly visible role was played by originally Persianate forms of the Islamic humanities in poetry, music, the visual arts, and a host of associated social and devotional practices—all both spiritually effective and quickly creatively integrated in a host of different pre-existing cultures and linguistic communities. Eventually this still unchronicled, far-reaching, profoundly popular and truly 'democratic' historical profusion of religious and cultural creativity—so memorably and vehemently denounced at its very inception by Ibn Taymiyya, and by his fervent imitators on to the present—gave rise to that far-flung Islamic Civilization which has continued to shape and inspire the faith and practice of the considerable majority of the world's Muslims down to our own day.<sup>6</sup>

Against the backdrop of the remarkable forging of that new, multi-cultural—and almost everywhere notably multi-confessional—pan-Asian Islamic Civilization, what immediately stands out, when we consider the essential content and underlying intentions of Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophy, is that we find certain remarkably comparable philosophical and spiritual 'colleagues' (the Persian expression *ham-kārān* is perhaps more evocative of their affinities and their common tasks) in each major cultural sphere of that newly configured Islamic Civilization. In each case, the thought and active work of each of these influential philosophic peers, in very focused and lastingly effective ways, was carefully centred on the active defense and intellectual maintenance of the above-mentioned essential pre-conditions for dialogue and Civilization. On a purely textual, intellectual level, the philosophy (and often the poetry) of each of these historically key defenders of that new Islamic Civilization is devoted to the creative communication of the balanced harmonisation and integration of the three equally indispensable classic elements of *kamāl* (human perfection): of spiritual experience and inspiration; their scriptural and devotional foundations; and of rationally responsible reflection and action: what the textbook accounts typically summarise as the three approaches of *'aql*, *naql*, and *kashf*.

Of course what those three emblematic expressions, and their far more complex philosophical and poetic elaborations, actually stood for is well known to historical specialists studying of each of these seminal figures and their original settings. Yet what is surely equally important, in a wider civilizational perspective, is what their distinctive ideas also stood *against*: i.e., in contrast to those perennial intellectual and cultural currents (to be found everywhere, certainly not just in Islamic thought!) that would necessarily destroy each of the above four essential conditions for genuine dialogue and the ongoing creative elaboration of Civilization. That ongoing 'civilizational *drama*' underlying their philosophical efforts is of course most familiar, for today's Iranian scholars, in the manifold ways subsequent generations have dealt with, reinterpreted, attacked, defended, and approached the thought and writings of Mullā Ṣadrā. However, what is perhaps much less adequately appreciated is the way those same recurrent dramas have been re-enacted in both the works and the equally controversial and eventful heritage of so many of Ṣadrā's peers in other cultural regions of that later Islamic Civilization.

To take only a few decisive names of such central figures who have recently begun to attract increasing scholarly attention—and in each case, not just as historical curiosities, but because of their obvious ongoing relevance to perennially heated debates about the possibility and very desirability of dialogue and Civilization—we might begin with the figure of Da'ūd al-Qayṣari.<sup>7</sup> Best-known in later Iranian thought (including Ṣadrā's own works) for his remarkably accessible and authoritative commentary on Ibn 'Arabi's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, Qayṣari's wider, lasting influence in the creation and elaboration of Islamic Civilization in fact flowed from his important guiding role (along with many other like-minded collaborators, of course) in the creation of an official Ottoman educational system in which the intellectual formation of the elite administrative-clerical class and their understanding and application of the *shari'a* in that thoroughly multi-confessional, multi-cultural empire was in fact centred on the far-reaching, intrinsically creative civilizational perspectives of Ibn 'Arabi. This centrality of Ibn 'Arabi as a primarily authoritative exponent and interpreter of the *shari'a* (the foundational body of Islamic religious sources and interpretive disciplines) among certain key foundational elements of later Ottoman culture is an entirely unsuspected historical reality—at least in the distorting light of today's prevailing Islamic polemics—whose still enduring influences I was only recently surprised to rediscover while lecturing to Muslim theology students in Sarajevo.

Among the widely scattered, but historically longstanding, Hui Muslim communities of China, the pioneering studies of Sachiko Murata (together with several of her Chinese and Japanese colleagues) have brought to light the comparable creative philosophical role of figures like Liu Chih (early 17<sup>th</sup> century), in initiating and making possible a far-reaching and lastingly influential civilizational dialogue between Islamic thought—again as represented above all by Ibn 'Arabi and his Persianate interpreters such as Jāmi—and the surrounding 'neo-Confucian' cultures of the Far East in Ṣadrā's time.<sup>8</sup> As with each of these Asian Muslim thinkers only briefly mentioned here, the larger relevance of these writings flows not so much from their own philosophical, theological and intellectual content, as from the decisive cultural-political role of those writings in defending (whether explicitly or implicitly) and helping to make possible much wider, popular, and far-reaching forms of cultural dialogue, creativity and exchange: essential Civilizational conditions which are immediately threatened, or quite simply become impossible, whenever the intellectual and cultural leadership of a particular community opt for alternative forms of religious authority and interpretation which would instead destroy the foundational conditions for dialogue and potential Civilization.<sup>9</sup>

In Southeast Asia, the even more widely influential contemporary figure of the Sufi poet and religious thinker Ḥamzah Fansūri, whose seminal creative works helped to shape the Muslim language of that immense region, is at least known by name, thanks to the pioneering studies of Prof. al-Attas.<sup>10</sup> But today a number of younger Malaysian and Indonesian scholars (including my own doctoral student, Mr. Rushdan Jailani, and others speaking later in this conference programme) are

only beginning to explore the actual historical contexts and inspiration of Fansūri's seminal writings, and of the long chain of scholarly controversies and interpretations—so highly reminiscent of Ṣadrā's own equally eventful posterity here in Iran—which developed around his writings in subsequent centuries. What those recent historians have already discovered, though, strongly highlights the central role of the Persianate Islamic humanities, including the classical Sufi poets and above all the decisive figure of the philosopher-poet-theologian-courtier 'Abdurrahmān Jāmi (a true 'Renaissance man'), in inspiring—just as he did in Muslim China—so many of the characteristic themes and expressions of Fansūri's work, and indeed many other characteristic expressions of Islamic Civilization, in that key formative period of Southeast Asian Islam.

The recent scholarly rediscovery of the inspiring influence of Jāmi—not simply as a widely read poet, but above all as a decisive intellectual, theological and philosophical defender of the fundamental conditions for dialogue and for a multi-cultural, multi-confessional Islamic Civilization—in both Southeast Asian and Chinese Islam is of course anything but accidental. For the theatre of the most widespread, multi-faceted and multi-lingual creative elaboration of Islamic Civilization in the post-Mongol period is of course to be found throughout the Indian subcontinent, including quite disparate linguistic and cultural areas, as in South India and Sri Lanka, often far removed from any overt forms of Muslim political and military domination. And in that theatre, of course, the perennial human choices between dialogue and domination, between philosophy and misosophy, and between Civilization and barbarism (*jāhiliyya*) have been repeatedly and quite dramatically played out, in ways whose visible consequences have remained visible for all to see. And almost everywhere that those choices have been for the creative, constructive possibilities of genuine dialogue and Civilization, we find the unmistakable signs of the lasting influence of central figures like Jāmi and his own poetic and intellectual guides and predecessors—above all, of the 'Greatest Master' (*al-Shaykh al-Akbar*), Ibn 'Arabī.

#### IV. Conclusion

Many lessons could be drawn from each of these Ṣadrā-like historical figures—as they could be from other comparable later Muslim thinkers and creators who could be added to this unavoidably brief list. Here I would simply like to highlight one such lesson which might not be so obvious. Young students, in every Civilization, often turn to the study of philosophy because of the answers they think it may provide to the pressing existential questions which led them to that study. In contrast, the practical, contemporary relevance of detailed historical studies of earlier cultures often seems much less obvious, while its many immediate practical demands must seem both painstaking and boring. When we turn our attention to Civilizations, though, something like the opposite turns out to be the case.

For Civilization, like those fundamental conditions for dialogue which sustain it and make it possible, is a remarkably rare, and perhaps an unavoidably ephemeral human achievement. Yet like so many divine gifts, it is also something that people tend to take for granted, and which they only really begin to appreciate once it has disappeared—as so obviously has happened, almost everywhere in this world, in recent times. And with that disappearance, as Hegel famously remarked, wonder—and thus philosophy—reappears. So in this case, it is precisely deeper, more probing and thoughtful *historical* studies that can perhaps alone remind us—everywhere that ‘Civilization’ has so miraculously appeared in the past—of the daunting spiritual tasks and responsibilities of dialogue and co-operative creation which actually were required to bring those remarkable Civilizational achievements into existence.

For the same tasks are still incumbent today on anyone who takes seriously the challenges of rediscovering and re-creating that indispensable vehicle for fully realizing our common humanity. In the face of the extraordinary achievements of a Mullā Sadrā, or of any of those other incomparable, often anonymous creators and poets who together brought into being that Islamic Civilization (and the constituent Islamic humanities) he was so passionately striving to defend, it is all too easy to forget that the ongoing ‘clash of cultures’ and of barbarisms is not some quite unheard-of tragedy or some uniquely modern dilemma. On the contrary, it is exactly what all the outward history of this world is apparently made of—and at the same time, it is the absolutely essential seedbed for genuine dialogue, creation and any nascent global Civilization. We may wake up each morning to the din of barbarism. But the uniquely human spiritual possibility of dialogue and creation, of *iḥsān* and *adab*, is all our own.

In that light, it is surely no accident that I was suddenly reminded, while composing this essay, of a line from Sa’adi’s *Gulistān* that must have been some of the first words I ever read in Persian. For it so beautifully and simply sums up everything there really is to say—and more importantly, to do—about these recurrent human challenges of dialogue and Civilization:

Seven dervishes can be wrapped in a single blanket;

But even the seven climes can’t hold two emperors.

## Notes

1. Thus those who first began to speak of that reality very quickly identified it with the existence of *cities*. That was not out of some arbitrary disdain for those rural, nomadic, or mountainous villages and tribes where most of humanity has always lived until past century, but rather in recognition of those *essential elements of diversity and dialogue* that are normally inseparable from complex citted life in all historical settings.

2. See the further development of these essential dimensions of human 'realisation' (*taḥqīq*), in relation to this Sura 103, in the Preface and Introduction to our recent *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilization* (London, Archetype, 2004).
3. The Qur'an 2:256: *There is no compulsion in the (divine) Religion....*
4. 'And if you are not, then you *do* see Him', in the esoteric reading of that infinitely multi-faceted Prophetic response (*wa in lam takun, tarāhu*).
5. In many different cultural domains, of course, the creative models and initial vehicles for communicating that broader understanding of Islam were in that 'new-Persian' language which became for centuries the cultural, diplomatic, commercial, and spiritual *lingua franca* of the wider Islamic Civilization of that period, from central Europe to East and Southeast Asia. And equally, in later centuries and down to our own time, the gradual disintegration of that wider Islamic Civilization has everywhere been marked by the slow disappearance of the Islamic humanities conveyed by that *lingua franca* and its local vernacular continuations.
6. Western readers of this essay may not be sufficiently aware of the remarkable fact that the range of locally dominant political ideologies and historical 'mythologies' that have come to govern over the past century the dominant political and cultural discourse and self-conception within the dozens of smaller nation-states that today occupy the same geographical expanse as that vast pan-Asian (and eastern European) Islamic Civilization all have in common—despite their dramatic outward disparity of outlooks—an extraordinarily far-reaching attitude of historical 'erasure' toward the previous presence and ethico-cultural underpinnings of the locally operative expressions of that wider Islamic Civilization. This is just as true in newer nation-states with ostensibly 'Islamic' ideologies as it is in countries with predominantly Marxist, ethno-linguistic, or other 'religious' forms of nationalism.
7. See the many important contributions in the bilingual volume of the *International Symposium on Islamic Thought and in the XIIIth and XIVth Centuries and Daud Al-Qaysari*, ed. T. Koç (Ankara, 1998), including my article on 'The Continuing Relevance of Qaysari's Thought: Divine Imagination and the Foundations of Natural Spirituality'.
8. Sachiko Murata (and W. Chittick), *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light* (Albany, SUNY Press, 2000), including parallel translations of Liu Chih's *Displaying the Concealment of the Real Realm* and the parallel passages of Jāmi's *Lawā'ih*.
9. Detailed, and often truly pioneering regional illustrations of this ongoing Civilizational conflict can be found throughout the extensive volume (840 pages), *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, ed. F. Dejong and B. Radtke (Leiden, Brill, 1999).
10. To which one should add the recent pioneering historical studies by Prof. C. Macinkowski (ISTAC, Malaysia) which concretely illustrate the extensive specifically Iranian influences (as well as the wider, better-known influences of Persianate South Asian literatures) in the earliest stages of the transmission of Islam throughout the coastal regions of Southeast Asia.