

ROUTLEDGE INNOVATIONS IN POLITICAL THEORY

Deep Cosmopolis

Rethinking World Politics and
Globalization

Adam K. Webb



Adam Webb brilliantly explores an alternative path to globalization with dashing originality and stunning erudition. Webb defends a cosmopolitanism that is at once rooted and diverse, culturally rich and historically sensitive. His vision of a 'deep cosmopolis' draws at once on the virtues of 'local knowledge' and the universalist impulse that is embedded within all human cultures, yet resists the homogenized and flattened form of globalization encouraged by an elite class dismissive of local diversity and impatient with the rich complexity of civilizations.

Patrick Deneen, *University of Notre Dame, USA*

Deep Cosmopolis

Too often, observers of globalisation take for granted that the common ground across cultures is a thin layer of consumerism and perhaps human rights. If so, then anything deeper and more traditional would be placebound and probably destined for the dustbin of history. But must this be so? Must we assume—as both liberals and traditionalists now tend to do—that one cannot be a cosmopolitan and take traditions seriously at the same time? This book offers a radically different argument about how traditions and global citizenship can meet, and suggests some important lessons for the contours of globalisation in our own time.

Adam K. Webb argues that if we look back before modernity, we find a very different line of thinking about what it means to take the whole world as one's horizon. Digging into some fascinating currents of thought and practice in the ancient world, the Middle Ages, and the early modern period, across all major civilisations, Webb is able to reveal patterns of 'deep cosmopolitanism', with its logic quite unlike that of liberal globalisation today. In their more cosmopolitan moments, everyone from clerics to pilgrims to empire-builders was inclined to look for deep ethical parallels—points of contact—among civilisations and traditions. Once modernity swept aside the old civilisations, however, that promise was largely forgotten. We now have an impoverished view of what it means to embrace a tradition and even what kinds of conversations across traditions are possible. Webb draws out the lessons of deep cosmopolitanism for our own time. If revived, it has something to say about phenomena from the rise of new non-Western powers such as China and India and what they offer the world, to religious tolerance, to global civil society, to cross-border migration.

Deep Cosmopolis traces an alternative strand of cosmopolitan thinking that cuts across centuries and civilisations. It advances a new perspective on world history, and a distinctive vision of globalisation for this century which has the real potential to resonate with us all.

Adam K. Webb is Resident Professor of Political Science at the Hopkins-Nanjing Centre, which is one of the two overseas branches of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies.

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Edited by Terrell Carver and Jernej Pikalo

31 Political Pluralism and the State

Beyond sovereignty

Marcel Wissenburg

- 32 Political Evil in a Global Age**
Hannah Arendt and international theory
Patrick Hayden
- 33 Gramsci and Global Politics**
Hegemony and resistance
Mark McNally and John Schwarzmantel
- 34 Democracy and Pluralism**
The political thought of William E. Connolly
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- 35 Multiculturalism and Moral Conflict**
Edited by Maria Dimova-Cookson and Peter Stirk
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The saint of rationalism
Edited by Georgios Varouxakis and Paul Kelly
- 37 Rethinking Gramsci**
Edited by Marcus E. Green
- 38 Autonomy and Identity**
The politics of who we are
Ros Hague
- 39 Dialectics and Contemporary Politics**
Critique and transformation from Hegel through post-Marxism
John Grant
- 40 Liberal Democracy as the End of History**
Fukuyama and postmodern challenges
Chris Hughes
- 41 Deleuze and World Politics**
Alter-globalizations and nomad science
Peter Lenco
- 42 Utopian Politics**

Citizenship and practice
Rhiannon Firth

43 Kant and International Relations Theory

Cosmopolitan community building
Dora Ion

44 Ethnic Diversity and the Nation State

National cultural autonomy revisited
David J. Smith and John Hiden

45 Tensions of Modernity

Las Casas and his legacy in the French Enlightenment
Daniel R. Brunstetter

46 Honor

A phenomenology
Robert L. Oprisko

47 Critical Theory and Democracy

Essays in honour of Andrew Arato
Edited by Enrique Peruzzotti and Martín Plot

48 Sophocles and the Politics of Tragedy

Cities and transcendence
Jonathan N. Badger

49 Isaiah Berlin and the Politics of Freedom

'Two concepts of liberty' 50 years later
Edited by Bruce Baum and Robert Nichols

50 Popular Sovereignty in the West

Politics, contention, and ideas
Geneviève Nootens

51 Pliny's Defense of Empire

Thomas R. Laehn

52 Class, States and International Relations

A critical appraisal of Robert Cox and neo-Gramscian theory
Adrian Budd

53 Civil Disobedience and Deliberative Democracy

William Smith

54 Untangling Heroism

Classical philosophy and the concept of the hero

Ari Kohen

55 Rethinking the Politics of Absurdity

Albert Camus, postmodernity, and the survival of innocence

Matthew H. Bowker

56 Kantian Theory and Human Rights

Edited by Reidar Maliks and Andreas Follesdal

57 The Political Philosophy of Judith Butler

Birgit Schippers

58 Hegel and the Metaphysical Frontiers of Political Theory

Eric Lee Goodfield

59 Time, Memory, and the Politics of Contingency

Smita A. Rahman

60 Michael A. Weinstein

Action, contemplation, vitalism

Edited by Robert L. Oprisko and Diane Rubenstein

61 Deep Cosmopolis

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Adam K. Webb



Missionary encounters in late Ming China. Matteo Ricci and Paul Xu Guangqi. From *La Chine d'Athanase Kirchère de la Compagnie de Jesus, illustrée de plusieurs monuments tant sacrés que profanes* (Amsterdam, 1670).

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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2015
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor and Francis Group, an informa business

© 2015 Taylor & Francis

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Webb, Adam Kempton

Deep cosmopolis : rethinking world politics and globalisation / Adam K. Webb.

pages cm. – (Routledge innovations in political theory)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Cosmopolitanism. 2. Civilization. 3. World politics. 4. Globalization.

I. Title.

JZ1308.W43 2015

327–dc23

2014046211

ISBN: 978-1-138-89132-6 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-70970-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Werset Ltd, Boldon, Tyne and Wear

**In memory of my grandmother
Enid Wheat
1906–1985**

Contents

Acknowledgements

- 1 Circuits of the Sacred
- 2 Civilisation with a Capital C
- 3 Beyond the Frontiers
- 4 The World Religions
- 5 Mediæval Mirrors and the Virtuous Outsider
- 6 Strutting on the Stage of Empires
- 7 Missionaries, Mystics, and the Melding of Faiths
- 8 Modernity's Derailments
- 9 Globalisation and New Landscapes of Power
- 10 Relearning How to Talk Across Traditions
- 11 Interreligious Dialogue and Its Limits
- 12 Homelands and Hospitality
- 13 World Citizens in the Making
- 14 Void or Cosmos?

Notes

Index

Acknowledgements

This book took a meandering route of more than a decade, on and off, from start to finish. While the first inspiration came while I was still at Princeton, I was fortunate in 2003–2004 to spend a year as a visiting scholar at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. The generous support of the Academy allowed me to read widely and to iron out much of the theoretical framework of the project. My subsequent time teaching in Social Studies at Harvard University provided a lively intellectual environment in which the arguments further took shape. Over the years since, I have had the opportunity to benefit from other substantial library collections around the world, including at Nanjing University, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Exeter, and the British Library.

A number of readers have commented on drafts of the manuscript. I am especially grateful to Di Hu and David D Yang not only for feedback on writing but also for many conversations over the years on the book's themes. Various written incarnations of, and around, the book also benefited from comments by Susan McWilliams, Jonathan M Hansen, Vincent W Lloyd, Elliot Ratzman, Mark C Henrie, George Panichas, Tracy Rowland, R R Reno, Mark Shiffman, John Médaille, Peter Wood, Xia Xi, Tong Zhichao, Thomas Simon, and Thom Wolf.

Presentations over the years in various settings helped with refining the arguments in the book. I am grateful for insightful questions and comments at talks given at the American Political Science Association, the International Studies Association, the Northeastern Political Science Association, the New York State Political Science Association, the World History Association, the University of Hong Kong, Nanjing University, the Lahore School of Economics, Forman Christian College, and the Landour School, and to Johns Hopkins alumni in Nairobi. My contributions to the *Front Porch Republic* website elicited some provocative comments and reminded me that the widest horizons

must also be filled with real places.

The discussion of cosmopolitanism in the Arab Spring benefited from interviews with many activists whom I cannot name due to the vicissitudes of politics. I am grateful for the time they took to speak with me during a challenging period, and I trust that in coming years they will see more hopeful circumstances. For assistance beforehand with preparing some of the interviews and improving my colloquial Arabic, I am thankful to Dareen Hasan.

The last few years at the Hopkins-Nanjing Centre have been a congenial environment for writing and revising much of the manuscript as well as for giving talks relating to its themes.

Comments by Routledge's anonymous reviewers were helpful for the last round of revisions. I also want to thank Natalja Mortensen and Lillian Rand for shepherding the book through production.



The monk Xuan Zang returning from India. Dunhuang mural, Cave 103. High Tang period (AD 712–765).

1 Circuits of the Sacred

In the year 629, a monk named Xuanzang set out from the Tang dynasty capital at Chang'an, bound for India. The young man had been born into a distinguished family of Chinese officials, but his attraction to Buddhism had led him to join a monastery and seek ordination at the tender age of thirteen. Then, years of learning Sanskrit and devoted study of the Buddhist scriptures had made him long for better translations, which could only come from the religion's birthplace. Buddhism had entered China from India several centuries earlier, but the distance from its origins, both geographic and mental, was formidable.

Xuanzang's pilgrimage to India was no easy matter. It took over a year via central Asia and the Himalayas, during which he 'crossed trackless wastes tenanted only by fierce ghost-demons ... [and] climbed fabled mountains high beyond conjecture, rugged and barren, ever chilled by icy wind and cold with eternal snow'. During some fifteen years in India, he meandered the width of the subcontinent from Kashmir to Bengal, worshipping at hundreds of monasteries and meeting thousands of monks. He recorded the peculiarities of Indian life in striking detail. The Indian Buddhists welcomed him as one of their own, and a local ruler even convoked a debate about the finer points of religious doctrine, over which Xuanzang was invited to preside. Some monks urged him to stay permanently in India. 'What greater happiness can you have than spending the rest of your life visiting the holy sites?' they asked him. Xuanzang replied that he had to return to his homeland to take back 'the hidden meanings of the different schools' that he had learned. And return he did, arriving back in Chang'an in 645 to a festive welcome and an audience with a curious emperor. He brought with him twenty horses laden with a collection of 657 Buddhist texts and 150 relics.¹

Nearly fourteen centuries later, a year to cross the Himalayas has shrunk to three hours. Hundreds of thousands of people per year travel between China and India. Rather than trudging through snow and gasping thin air like Xuanzang,

you can sit in the comfort of an airline seat and survey the curve of the horizon. When you land at either end, the welcome is different than it was for Xuanzang. You stride through a shiny new climate-controlled airport. Your visa is scanned perfunctorily by passport control officers who, despite their different features and complexions, are clad in the uniforms and manners of the modern state. These two states happen to be aiming missiles at one another across the mountains, but that does not stop the flow of latter-day pilgrims.

But who are these pilgrims? A handful of them still follow the same circuits of the sacred as did Xuanzang. The first time I ever heard Chinese being spoken with a heavy Indian accent was when I came across a couple of dozen Buddhist pilgrims at the holy site of Sarnath, not far from the Ganges in northern India. They had come from China and were being escorted by an Indian guide speaking to them in their own tongue. His voice carried through the drizzle of a cool winter afternoon. Sarnath was the site of the Buddha's first sermon and has long been a key pilgrimage site for Buddhists from across Asia. Xuanzang himself found some 1500 monks there when he visited. Today, most of the large complex lies in ruins, with low clusters of red sandstone, streaked with black here and there, and interspersed with neatly trimmed green grass.

Visiting Sarnath is certainly easier now than in Xuanzang's time. The short flight from China and India updates the manner, but not the essence, of this circuit of the sacred. It is a circuit that long predates, and will surely outlast, any Ozymandian power of the moment. While states try to manage pilgrims' movements, the spirit of the pilgrimage is beyond the state's reach and beyond much of the flux of history. The Chinese I saw at Sarnath wore modern clothing, and one later brought out an iPad for a photograph, but their hushed tones and the reverence with which they prostrated themselves and then walked around the site's circular tower bespoke a deeply, timelessly religious motive for coming.

Yet while some things remain the same, other have changed dramatically. People such as the Chinese Buddhists walking around Sarnath are rare compared to the more usual pilgrims of our time. For today, merchants, rather than monks, are treading out their own circuits of the sacred. They do not venture abroad to bring back scriptures in Sanskrit. Instead, today's eager go-getters brandish mobile phones and business cards in English. In their own way, they do break down some of the barriers between countries. Trade between China and India has grown in leaps and bounds in recent years, as new webs of interest link the two giant economies. Perhaps the old saying is right, that there is no force in history so powerful as a low price. Profit promises to warm even the chilliest of

relations. A thousand kilometres west from Sarnath, the Attari–Wagah border crossing into Pakistan has a mere trickle of travellers, despite huge car parks and shiny new facilities, obviously built in expectation that numbers will grow. And in January 2014, a few days before I passed through the eerily quiet inspection hall, the Indian and Pakistani trade ministers had announced new measures aiming to expand the flow of goods through that crossing.

Both the religious pilgrims of old and today's seekers of profit can be considered cosmopolitans. The word comes from ancient Greek and literally means a citizen of the universe, or a citizen of the whole known world. But the cosmos has changed. It has little room for monks walking from Chang'an to Sarnath seeking truth; and Chinese emperors no longer welcome them and the scriptures they bear. Our global rituals have quite another imagery now. In the new spirit, the organisers of the 2008 Beijing Olympics adopted the motto, 'One World, One Dream'. They proclaimed that 'We belong to the same world and we share the same aspirations and dreams.'² The global dream apparently had required the razing of Beijing's old neighbourhoods to make way for more skyscrapers to impress those in attendance. Global metropolis links to global metropolis, in a sanitised prosperity that strives to keep up with the future. In this new cosmos, the stars have descended from the heavens to glitter from the shop-fronts.

Much of this shift has obviously been driven by the upsurge of globalisation, especially over the last two decades. The new circuits of trade bind countries together in a certain way. As the Japanese journalist Funabashi Yoichi put it, the Asian Pacific Rim has become a 'hotbed of middle-class globalism', 'animated by workaday pragmatism, the social awakening of a flourishing middle class and the moxie of technocrats'. Such energy extends far beyond Asia. Thus we hear breathless commentators pronounce the world 'flat', bound together by ever tighter networks of communication and trade, all countries squeezed into the lucrative 'Golden Straitjacket' of capitalism. Globalisation has also been called 'the second bourgeois revolution'. If the first stage was the nineteenth-century breakthrough within Western countries, setting entrepreneurial energy free from feudalism, then today's second stage is capital's escape from the constraints of national regulation. Global business thrives on so-called 'flexible accumulation'. Rather than a stable workforce in one place, it needs leeway to adapt to ever shifting opportunities across the planet.³

While much of the energy of today's globalisation does come from such profit-seeking, we cannot understand it only in mercenary terms. To do so would

be too dismissive and would miss much of the magic in it that attracts people. For many observers, liberal globalisation holds out the promise not only of prosperity but above all of freedom. The more wide-ranging the flows of resources and people, the looser the controls that placebound authorities such as governments can exert over individuals. As Manuel Castells, prophet of the globalised ‘network society’, put it, ‘The power of flows takes precedence over the flows of power.’⁴ Room for choice and questioning is opened up. In this vein, Nobel-Prize-winning author V S Naipaul—of Indian ethnicity and Trinidadian birth, and long based in London—has welcomed the ‘awakened spirit’ that comes from ‘our universal civilisation’. This new civilisation, he explains, is different from all earlier ones and ‘a long time in the making’. ‘It is an elastic idea; it fits all men.’ Unlike the old traditions that offered an idea of truth, this universal civilisation disturbs people with doubt and forces them to make their own way in the world. Experience it long enough, and ‘other more rigid systems in the end blow away’.⁵

Today’s cosmopolis is transforming how hundreds of millions, perhaps billions, of people think about their lives. Opportunity and uprooting are two sides of the same coin, the currency of liberal modernity. Modernity creates a kind of ‘homelessness’. The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk describes it as a transition from ‘agrarian patriotism’ to ‘the global self’. The old bonds of home undone, the world turns into a series of ‘deserts’ with ‘nomads’ wandering across them.⁶

On this new landscape in which place matters ever less, people are finding common ground of a kind across longer distances. A few years ago, one of my Chinese postgraduate students in Nanjing remarked that he felt more in common with his roommate from New York than with his own grandparents in a Chinese village. During his months in my class he had shown a knack for getting to the point, as well as a certain tough-mindedness from his experience working in the global business world. On more than one occasion, he tried to convince his classmates that they, too, should appreciate this brave new world more because it served their personal interests better than they acknowledged.

Yet for everyone who sees liberal globalisation as an arena for ambition, there is someone else who sees it as a potential moral breakthrough. Alongside the business classes are the many liberal and educated people—academics, journalists, NGO managers, and the like—who make up the so-called ‘new class’ of the progressive and reform-minded. They certainly see themselves as public-spirited rather than mercenary, as global citizens rather than just global

investors and consumers.⁷ In short, the link between the global market and consumer culture, on the one hand, and liberal ideas, on the other, is tricky. Ideas often do gain currency because they fit the economic realities of the time. But many sincere liberals will also insist that something essentially human is being set free by today's globalisation. Profit and sentimentality can go together in ways that capture the cultural moment. Thus the former CEO of Disney suggested that 'Disney characters strike a universal chord with children, all of whom share an innocence and openness before they become completely moulded by their respective societies.'⁸

As this book will argue, there is much that is problematic about liberal globalisation. There are also plenty of resources for thinking about what might come after it. But to be fair we first must understand, on its own terms, exactly what the liberal cosmopolitan vision offers. What is the best foot it can put forward?

Take an influential book from a few years ago. Perhaps it does not put forth anything wholly new, but it does flesh out a liberal line of thinking that represents the aspirations of many educated people. It is *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, by Kwame Anthony Appiah.⁹ Appiah has his own cosmopolitan bona fides beyond doubt, as a Ghanaian-English-American philosopher whose career has spanned three continents. He tells us that the task of our time is to abandon habits of mind that were formed 'over the long millennia of living in local troops', if we are to learn to 'live together as the global tribe we have become'. Global citizenship demands respect for people distant and different from ourselves, a respect based simply on our common humanity. Sometimes such 'kindness, generosity, and compassion' will mean aiding people in dire need anywhere in the world.

Appiah does not stop at our duty to help distant strangers. He also insists that the true cosmopolitan will be curious about cultural differences. Such appreciation need not mean trying to preserve ways of life that people in them want to abandon. He ultimately gives only individuals, not cultures, moral standing. He says that clinging to supposed authenticity is a lost cause anyway given the 'inevitably mongrel, hybrid nature of living cultures'. Rather, he hopes for plenty of 'cosmopolitan contamination' across the inhabitants of the 'global village'. They should mix and match, broadening their horizons in ways that only the modern world has made possible. According to this line of thinking, liberal modernity holds out the best hope of human dignity and fulfilment. To many sincere liberals, this promise of liberty and enlightenment means far more

than the gaudy consumer culture that happens to have come at the same time. Appiah also offers an important disclaimer, namely that people like him are not hostile to any truths that tradition might contain. ‘We cosmopolitans believe in universal truth, too’, he writes.

It is not scepticism about the very idea of truth that guides us; it is realism about how hard the truth is to find.... Another aspect of cosmopolitanism is what philosophers call fallibilism—the sense that our knowledge is imperfect, provisional, subject to revision in the face of new evidence.

Here we see what liberal cosmopolitans like Appiah believe to be the crux of the issue. They do not set their vision in contrast to truth, and virtue, and all the other things that today’s world might plausibly be accused of neglecting. Rather, they set liberalism in contrast to insularity, intolerance, and overconfidence. Boundaries need breaking down, on liberal terms, because the sort of people who take boundaries too seriously do things to crush the human spirit.

This theme runs through much liberal writing, not only among such philosophers as Appiah but also among the culturally uprooted literati. Take the Bulgarian-French psychiatrist and social critic Julia Kristeva. She says that having had to create herself from nothing as an international migrant, she has crafted a cosmopolitan identity ‘at the crossing of boundaries’. It is liberating to choose who one is. She mocks the ‘weird primal paradise’ that people of a nationalistic temper want to preserve or revive.¹⁰ Similarly, the Chinese essayist Liu Zaifu, long in exile after 1989, has described himself as a ‘crevice person’. The cultural ideals of each society build to a peak, but at their edges are the crevices where those like him can sit, taking nothing too seriously.¹¹

Sometimes it is not enough to take pride in one’s own position at the cultural margins; one also has to shake up the complacent. The Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa declared in a 1967 speech that the purpose of literature is ‘to arouse, to disturb, to alarm’. More recently, he welcomed globalisation because it loosens up national loyalties and frees people to choose their own identity.¹² In the same spirit, the Jamaican philosopher Jason Hill celebrates those who live as ‘the moral antithesis of tribalism’ in violating the taboos of complacent peoples and places. ‘Hybridisation is a moral goal’, he affirms, ‘because it destabilises zones of purity and privilege.’ Living this way ‘stands as an affront to the images codified and made sacred by the culture at large. I become in essence an offence at large.’ Therein lies freedom.¹³

On one level, even those of us with deep misgivings about the tone of today's globalisation have to acknowledge some underlying motives of these writers. It is understandable that liberal cosmopolitans feel obliged to wage war on overconfident traditionalists. We all know those who invoke one or another tradition and who are convinced, in the narrowest of ways, that they know the whole truth and that it gives them a licence to impose themselves on others, or at least to lash out in all directions. Much bloodletting around the world is done in the name of tradition. The militants who cut off heads in front of the camera address the global village in the name of truth, not openness. Appiah is not wholly misguided when he indicts the so-called 'counter-cosmopolitans'. The religious fundamentalists are universalists like himself, he says, but their universalism would flatten all diversity except a few details like what fabric to use for women's obligatory scarves. Liberals see resistance to their vision of the world coming from two directions, both of which are unappealing. One is a rear-guard battle being fought by insular people, blind to the magic of the 'universal civilisation' that will set people free. Another is a strident backlash by young fundamentalists, the sort of malcontents who start riots and plant bombs. If that is what one sees of tradition, then it must be tempting to set one's vision of the global future in contrast to it.

Yet, as I shall argue in coming chapters, such a way of framing the issue is misleading. It rests on a false choice that urges us to accept, more or less by default, some unsettling tendencies in the world's present trajectory.

To understand where the problem lies, we have to dig more deeply into some key assumptions that cosmopolitans of the liberal sort are making. Their mode of openness and tolerance has a distinctive flavour. Indeed, we might call it the cosmopolitanism of spicery and getting along. It savours diversity and the cultural flows of our time because it holds that variety is the spice of life. With the internet, travel, and trade, diverse people now encounter one another much more often than their ancestors did. When they meet, they are supposed to respect one another but also to appreciate the sheer variety of the global landscape. The differences they bring to their encounters are rather like colourful accessories: enough to savour but not enough to get worked up about. This is globalisation as a convivial dinner party.

Liberals will insist, of course, that they have nothing against truth, merely against the sort of people who invoke truth to bludgeon others. We have already seen Appiah's remarks along those lines. But quite beyond fears of persecution, the liberal imagination does tend to see truth in a way that is rather unusual in

any world-historical perspective. As the philosopher of religion William James put it over a century ago, some people are more willing to risk missing truth by being too cautious than to risk embracing error by being too credulous.¹⁴ Better heathen than hoodwinked, so to speak. This logic holds that a person unburdened by truth is in a bearable position, and perhaps even a comfortable one.

One has to take more or less this attitude in order to be a cosmopolitan of the spicery and getting-along sort. This is because, when pushed far enough, liberal cosmopolitans will usually end up admitting that truth matters less to them than some other things do. With the best of intentions, they say that the rights of individuals matter more than what those individuals happen to believe. This view goes well beyond the idea that we should not ill-treat people who disagree with us. There might be other sound reasons not to thrust a carving knife across the dinner table, after all. Rather, the liberal argument for tolerance rests on a certain notion of human dignity. As liberal thinkers have taken pains to argue, all societies in history have had ways of thinking about respect. But those societies generally respected people when they had earned such respect: when they filled their roles in society or when they had honourable qualities. That was the respect given to the aristocrat, or the warrior, or the pious believer, and so on. Liberals today defend a basic respect for all human beings, without having to weigh their virtues or style of life, as long as they hurt no one else. Any extra respect anyone gains is purely a matter of private opinion.¹⁵ Thus they look suspiciously on the more traditional view: that there are some truths about how human beings flourish, and that society as a whole cannot treat those truths with indifference.

It is quite right to want to prevent persecution. As a political claim about how states should protect everyone from ill treatment, it would be fairly modest. But the ambitions of the liberal vision do tend to spill over into changing society at large. One liberal philosopher, Bernard Williams, has suggested that real tolerance has to run much more deeply through daily experience, in ‘the attitude of one way of life toward another’. He sees hopeful signs that a no-questions-asked respect is taking root among the modern populace, which is becoming ever more indifferent to everything from religious faith to sexual morality. Personal choice is trumping standards of truth, in practice rather than just in theory. He credits much of this indifference about values to the civilising effect of ‘international commercial society’, which brings diverse people together.¹⁶

There are, of course, plenty of hard traditionalist critiques of that outlook. They are familiar and have kept cropping up throughout the modern era. Many such critiques revolve around the charge that modern liberalism is only about

escaping the demands of tradition. A century ago, the Catholic writer G K Chesterton responded to critics of his own religious tradition by insisting that ‘the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.’ More recently, the philosopher Allan Bloom described modern liberalism as very undemanding, as little more than a spirit of ‘self-ironical niceness’.¹⁷

That liberalism makes fewer demands may well account for its appeal to a swath of modern humanity. But we should be careful not to take too uncharitable a view of why people often take liberal assumptions for granted. After all, even some who have benefited greatly from the global economy and owe their comforts to it often feel disillusioned with the cultural project that seems to attach to liberalism. They may even have come to feel imprisoned by it, much like discovering that one has been warm because one is inside a pressure cooker. They may also look askance at the ghastly aesthetic of concrete, glass, and neon that seems to sprout across the world as global metropolis links to global metropolis. Yet they often still feel obliged to defend the liberal framework nonetheless, simply because the alternative—intolerance and bloodletting, or at least mind-numbing insularity—would be worse. Liberalism, even if not fully satisfying, is seen as the price of cosmopolitanism.

For many, liberalism wins this way by default, because they see a fault line drawn across the world and feel compelled to choose between its two sides. Two decades ago, in the early years of rampant globalisation, Benjamin Barber saw a world torn between ‘Jihad versus McWorld’.¹⁸ On one side are the various militants who lash out in the name of tribe and creed. On the other is global consumer culture, which privileges nothing but personal choice and the balance sheet. It has become too easy to assume that the choice is as the liberal cosmopolitans frame it. Either we are tolerant, or we are intolerant. Either we side with the mercenary and the irreverent, or we side with those who alternate between burying their heads in the sand and lashing out in all directions. Either we celebrate uprootedness, or we persecute the uprooted. If such is the choice, well-meaning people often end up siding with McWorld, simply because it at least is tolerant.

In this book, I shall argue that this is a false choice. Sadly, it is a false choice that many people on both sides of the debate take as given. This is perhaps the one thing that unites today’s cosmopolitans and anti-cosmopolitans. Both sides tend to accept that to be a cosmopolitan means to be some kind of liberal at war with tradition, and that to be a traditionalist means hunkering down and

defending one's own uniqueness. This false choice has turned the promise of globalisation into its ruin. The last few decades have bound the world ever more tightly together and expanded all our horizons. We should be eagerly having all kinds of cross-cultural conversations about matters of real, timeless import. But those conversations have been oddly selective and deformed. They have dwelt largely on money and mockery.

This unfortunate situation is a kind of cultural crisis in late modernity. Anyone attached to the legacy of the old civilisations and convinced that they have something timeless to teach us will be alarmed by the landscape of liberal globalisation. In effect even if not always in intent, it divides and conquers. Liberal cosmopolitans often dismiss the great traditions by saying that they pulled in different directions, even when they were not coming to blows over trivia. They insist that only liberalism can bridge diversity peacefully.

For those of us who do not accept the supposed liberal monopoly on tolerance, it is imperative to answer liberalism on its own global scale. Such an answer hinges on showing not only that the great traditions have much common ground but also that they can discover—or rediscover—ways of working together across diversity. They can offer a searing common indictment of what globalisation today has come to mean. And, not least, they can inspire a very different flavour of cosmopolitanism for the future, after the liberal era eventually passes into history.

I should say something here about where this book is coming from. I cannot ignore the deep personal commitments that lie behind it. Indeed, even to want to challenge the false choice I have described implies that one already finds it at odds with one's own experience and sensibilities. The liberal view of what it means to be a cosmopolitan insists, in effect, on forcing a deeply uncomfortable choice. It would place me—and many people, I suspect—in one of two places, neither of which I wish to occupy.

Who I am is one factor behind this book, I acknowledge. I grew up across three Western countries—England, Spain, and the United States of America—and feel at home in all of them. I have also spent a great deal of time on different continents, including in the global South. This book, for example, was first drafted while looking out at the glow of the Nanjing skyline, and then edited in settings ranging from an Andean highland village with no running water to a Himalayan hill station amid the fog of the monsoon. For several years now, I have not been spending a majority of the time in any one country. One does not talk with everyone from peasants in adobe huts, to activists in the middle of the

Arab Spring revolutions, to migrant workers in festering cities, without thinking of oneself in some sense as a citizen of the world. I appreciate the world's diversity while finding not one ounce of appeal in nationalism.

So far this may not seem enough to set me at odds with the liberal cosmopolitans. Many of them also spend time all over the world. And to a traditionalist of a certain sort, I admit that I might at first come across as a fearsome creature myself: a rootless cosmopolitan. But I do part company with the liberal cosmopolitans in one vital respect. They ultimately see the modern world as a straightforward improvement on the past, as having brought out human potential that was long suffocated. I am rather less optimistic about the modern culture that first came out of the West and has since spread elsewhere. Despite my background and my genuine attachment to much of the European heritage, my cultural allegiances generally do not line up with the political and social landscape of what the modern West has become and what the rest of the world is well on its way to replicating. I am not quite sure what to make of the amused observation by some people over the years that I seem to have come out of another era. It would be hard to judge in print anyway. But I do think that the world's great traditions are reservoirs of timeless wisdom, sadly unrecognised by and under assault from the prevailing currents of our time. I share with many people the sense that there are important ingredients of human flourishing left intact in some of the most 'backward' corners of the world. It would be a loss—and not merely in the sense of diminishing diversity—if they were crushed into oblivion by today's mode of globalisation.

To explain fully what is being lost would require a much longer discussion. Indeed, in my book *Beyond the Global Culture War* from some years ago, I outlined more fully some crucial differences between the modern world and more traditional societies.¹⁹ The great traditions all had language for talking about virtue and character types that were worth cultivating. There were an up and a down within the self, so to speak. Just as individuals could cultivate themselves to a greater or lesser extent, so too was society, at least in theory, supposed to side with virtue and against vice, and to structure itself around human ends. Those ideals could be diverse, ranging from the gentleman to the mystic to the loyal member of a brotherhood or a village. But there was a logic to how they could interlock, just as there was a logic to evaluating people's choices.

In modernity, we have seen the rise of liberalism in the broad sense, both as a set of political principles and as a type of society. The ideas about self and

society that we see in liberal political thought, and in our globalised consumer culture, are quite unusual in world history. They reduce much of life to choice and experience, on which society at large should not pass judgement. Critics rightly note that much tone and texture has been lost. As I argued in *Beyond the Global Culture War*, these rather thin self-understandings did crop up now and then in earlier eras, but they were always marginal. They were the province of the uprooted or those buffeted by misfortune, and those alienated from the prevailing ideals of the civilisation around them. It is only in modernity that, through a series of manoeuvres in a global culture war—both within and across societies—this atomist outlook and its bearers have risen to dominance. They look out on the world with the confidence of speaking to the widest horizons and having overcome stuffy and parochial traditions.

The argument of this book hinges on two core ideas. First, one can be a cosmopolitan of a very different flavour from what liberals today take for granted. Second, the insular backlash we see from most traditionalists today hardly does justice to the traditions they claim to represent. Combine both propositions, and we find another way to look at the world and the ever more intense cross-cultural encounters of this century. There are rich currents of cosmopolitan traditionalism that can inspire an alternative both more demanding and more satisfying than what the false choice has offered us. It is an alternative true to the spirit of the traditions, while also well equipped to challenge on the widest horizons the globalisation of concrete, glass, and neon.

This is a project of rediscovery, in the sense that the resources for a cosmopolitanism grounded in, and sympathetic to, the great traditions are not new. They have merely been forgotten in the modern era. This book looks back in the hope of recovering them.

It bears noting that today's liberal cosmopolitans often look back to the past as well, though for different purposes. While liberal globalisation offers a vision of the future, it also has a genealogy of sorts. Just as it benefits some people today more than others, so too does it identify with some of our ancestors more than others. Much of what we see today—the moneymaking energy, the scepticism, the tolerance that brackets truth, and so on—always existed, just in pockets here and there rather than as the mainstream of public culture.

Appiah himself says in passing that the kind of cosmopolitan tolerance he describes has its forerunners in history, in what he calls 'early experiments in multiculturalism'. He mentions the ability of Muslims, Jews, and Christians to live together in Spain and the Levant during the Middle Ages, without 'express

agreement on fundamental values'. In his version of history, trade and proximity were enough to sustain peace amid diversity. Whether such instances really were as he sees them is open to debate, but recalling them does suggest that what triumphs today is not new. Moreover, if we go back even further, to ancient Greece, we can find some schools of thought that foreshadow a quasi-liberal cosmopolitanism. The Sophists, for example, said that all human beings had common physical traits and capacities such as speech, which united them despite their political divisions. The Cynics felt at home everywhere and nowhere, as universal outcasts who flouted the conventions of place.²⁰ Appiah's world of 'mongrels' who joyfully contaminate one another has a pedigree despite itself.

Of course, most people in the past were not cosmopolitan mongrels, nor were they sceptics. Mostly they were rooted in the soil and the certainties of one or another tradition. But a sort of quasi-liberal cosmopolitanism did descend in enclaves here and there through the ages. Usually it found its nourishment in circles of trade. It is hardly surprising that many of today's cosmopolitans look back at the merchants of old as kindred spirits. Perhaps the local merchants buying and selling in a community or a city were confined to one universe, much like their neighbours. But a sort of sceptical uprootedness did flourish among the long-distance traders who trafficked their wares across cultures, braving parched deserts and freezing steppes and treacherous oceans to fill their purses with gold. As intermediaries among settled folk, they generally kept their distance. They disdained the placebound as much as they in turn were disdained as rootless. They were often as flexible in their own identities as they were distant from other people's. One world historian notes that the largest number of religious conversions in history happened among merchants who added up the practical benefits of joining one or another network of trust and found the balance tipping to another faith.²¹

So when I propose looking back in history, I am not alone. But unlike the liberal cosmopolitans, I shall look back in this book to a very different current of the past. I am seeking resources, from within the traditions of the great civilisations, for thinking about common ground and global citizenship. What I find is no mere intellectual abstraction, even though there was much sophisticated thinking about it. It was also rooted in long historical experience, which has been largely forgotten amid the turbulence of modernisation. The first half of this book digs back into the past to unearth this older and richer cosmopolitanism. I start with the four great civilisations of Eurasia: the Greco-Roman world that evolved into mediæval Christendom, the Muslim world,

Hindu India, and Confucian China. Each of these civilisations understood itself as universal, as speaking to humanity at large. It was a kind of globalisation in miniature, though vastly different from what we see today. Then I turn to the challenges they faced in trying to speak to one another. Far from being self-contained, these civilisations had plenty of contact at the margins over the centuries. The most thoughtful people involved—from missionaries to political adventurers to peacemakers—found some intriguing common ground. This was not the common ground of the merchants and the sceptics. Rather, it was a common ground found by digging more deeply into truths they already knew, not by bracketing or discarding them. I am going to call their outlook *deep cosmopolitanism*.

Looking back long before today's globalisation has two crucial advantages. First, it bypasses the huge inequalities that arose in modern times between Europe (and its offshoots) and the rest of the world. That chasm of development and power distorted the outlook of both colonisers and colonised. The complexes involved made it very hard to reflect on human questions that cut across the gap. Some of those inequalities have begun to flatten out lately, and there are a growing number of non-Westerners who feel little need to prove themselves to the West. Yet enough of the complexes linger and imprint themselves on any conversation about more recent interactions among civilisations. As a starting point, a longer-term view has less baggage.

The second advantage is that we can break the stranglehold of present-day liberal assumptions only if we go back before liberalism held sway. This means not having to argue on its terms, as any purely modern conversation tends to force us to do. It is often quite challenging to talk about history with the present-minded. There has been a tendency among many liberal cosmopolitans to demonise the past. As one of my Princeton colleagues put it some years ago, history before the French Revolution consisted of 'a few mad kings'. Many liberals' first reaction to what I aim to do in this book will be to say that the old civilisations are an unpromising place to look for lessons about globalisation, because they were usually self-absorbed and allowed great cruelties to go on. Mad kings used to chop off people's heads, after all. But I think we shall get a fuller picture of the potential of those old civilisations by taking them on their own terms, working forward to modernity rather than looking backward through today's lenses.

To be sure, any story about the past will put the facts in a certain light. I do admire the old civilisations and find much of value in them for our own use.

That does not mean that I wish to ignore their downsides. As we shall see, they were very often astoundingly insular, complacent, and arrogant towards outsiders. All of them shed blood on occasion to enforce orthodoxy or to subdue those who got in the way. But we have to untangle the strands of each civilisation. Yes, there were brutal zealots and xenophobes. There were also imaginative, curious, and sincere cosmopolitans. It is meaningless to say, in a snapshot of any historical moment, which sort of person represented the 'essence' of any society. We can learn lessons from the best, however, even if we have to be careful about the worst.

In the first half of this book, I try to bring to life some vital aspects of our past. Those hopeful instances of reaching out across civilisations suggest a very different way to think about cosmopolitanism in our own time. When viewed in their full trajectory over the centuries, moreover, they hint at a potential in world history that was realised in fits and starts. Cosmopolitan impulses grounded in the traditions became ever more sophisticated over time, before they were shut down abruptly by liberal modernity around the nineteenth century. Looking at world history this way means appreciating that there are really two rival cosmopolitanisms coming down to us. One is a deep cosmopolitanism, which tries to reconcile truths across the differences of culture and experience. The other is a liberal cosmopolitanism, which finds common ground by saying that truth does not matter so much. The latter has come to define globalisation today, to the point that it claims a monopoly on the widest horizons.

When we take a long view of world history in this way, with rival cosmopolitanisms coming down through the ages, two temptations might beset us. On the one hand, an optimist could see a telos, a trajectory in which higher human ideals eventually will triumph. It is as the historian Arnold J Toynbee said:

If religion is a chariot, it looks as if the wheels on which it mounts towards Heaven may be the periodic downfalls of civilisations on Earth. It looks as if the movement of civilisations may be cyclic and recurrent, while the movement of religion may be on a single continuous upward line.²²

While deep cosmopolitanism may not be a religious tendency in the narrow sense, perhaps it has followed the same religious trajectory that Toynbee imagined. Its petering out in modernity could be just a momentary setback.

On the other hand, a pessimist could see little hope of recovering what might

have been. Deep cosmopolitanism might seem like a ‘lost cause’. One historian has noted the enthusiasm with which lost causes have captured the imagination of traditionalists all over the world: the English Jacobites, the Spanish Carlists, American Southerners, and so on. As reactions against modernity, such movements claim the moral high ground even though their ‘once and future project’ has little prospect of success and merely preaches to the already converted. The ‘nobility of failure’ becomes a badge of honour in itself and a mirror for the shortcomings of modern life.²³ If deep cosmopolitanism were just an eccentric tendency in ages past, then digging the details out of history might do no more than inspire yet another lost cause.

Here, I am going to take the more optimistic view. In the second half of the book, I draw out what a deep cosmopolitan vision could mean for us today. If the present flavour of globalisation is the odd man out in history—if it is unity without soul—then we have every reason to do all we can to revive the much older alternative that lies dormant. I am not going to pretend that its recovery is an easy matter. Many of the types of people who did take it seriously have died out with modernisation. On a landscape of cultural decay, it may be even more difficult to advance a deep cosmopolitanism today than it was to advance it in earlier centuries, when the civilisations were intact and the biggest challenge was making the boundaries among them more porous.

Still, things are not always dark. Sometimes traditions in disarray may also have more room for a creative rethinking of how they relate to each other. The urge to reach out is very much alive. There are many thoughtful traditionalists today who are groping their way toward dialogue on one or another set of issues, such as on the finer points of religious doctrine or on how to address common practical tasks such as relieving poverty. These ad hoc efforts sometimes founder on obvious differences, or lack an overarching purpose to sustain them. Rediscovering this older, deeper cosmopolitanism might help accelerate such cross-cultural engagement and give it a broader sense of direction.

But the goal of this revival goes far beyond an exercise in mutual understanding, important though that may be on its own. It also has real political ends. Globalisation has already expanded our horizons politically as well as economically and culturally. In less than a generation, we have seen the emergence of new structures such as the European Union that transcend nation-states, the rise of China and India as potential new superpowers with a real lack of clarity about what they stand for and how they might put their stamp on the world, and the rise of cross-border activism in the Muslim world and elsewhere.

These and other trends demand, even on their own regional scales, a rethinking of large-scale loyalties and values that speak to more than just one place or one people.

In the worst of futures, we might end up in a world of hard-edged opulence for the few and squalid misery and vulnerability for the many, or even Armageddon as the ambitions of some actors outrun their ethical compass. In the best of futures, this older way of thinking has much to offer as we recraft our political universe at the global level. I suspect that if these more inspiring voices from the past could make themselves heard today, they would be urging us along a path very different from the one that so many now take for granted. They would be offering us a very different sort of citizenship in the cosmopolis.



Palace examination at Kaifeng, Song Dynasty, China.

2 Civilisation with a Capital C

In the year AD 97, General Ban Chao could gaze out with some relief on the sandy expanse of the Tarim Basin.¹ One of the most sparsely peopled territories on earth, this remote corner of central Asia might have seemed to have little worth fighting for. But the Chinese general had spent the last three decades of his life struggling to wrest back control of the area from the fierce Xiongnu barbarians of the northwest. They had waged war on and off for a couple of centuries, ever since his family had been based on this frontier as prosperous ranchers before they became literati. Ban Chao himself had chosen a different route from his father and brother and told himself, in a saying that descends to this day, ‘Throw away your writing brush and join the military!’ The choice had borne fruit. He had managed to bring order to the area, at least for the time being, thanks to the 70,000 soldiers under his command. Troops were now stationed throughout the basin to hang on to his hard-won gains.

The Tarim Basin mattered less for its own sake than for what lay beyond it. Civilisation was doing battle with barbarism because civilisation itself was bound to interests beyond the frontier. The new army outposts on the frontier of the Han empire secured control of this end of the vital trade routes leading westward across the steppes. Lessening the threat from marauders meant that merchants could ply their trade again, bringing luxury goods to and from China. The most important commerce went as far in the west as a vaguely known country called Da Qin. Ban Chao, resting on his laurels after victory and curious about the hazy world beyond the frontier, decided to probe further towards Da Qin. Instead of soldiers, he despatched a smaller expedition of explorers headed by his adjutant, Gan Ying.

The trip westward took years and must have been arduous given the terrain, the extreme weather changes between winter and summer, and the sheer distance. Gan Ying’s men crossed into the Parthian empire and got as far as the northern edge of the Persian Gulf. Da Qin, the mysterious source of fine cloth,

gems, and precious metals, lay somewhere beyond. Parthian merchants on the coast were unenthusiastic about Gan Ying's insistence on going on to see Da Qin for himself. The journey by sea around Arabia, to what the Parthians knew not as Da Qin but as the Roman empire, would not be easy. They told Gan Ying it might take him two more years, and that he stood a good chance of dying of either starvation or homesickness. After many such discouraging conversations, he eventually gave up and returned to China.

The Parthians had exaggerated the risks. They were concerned not with Gan Ying's safety but with keeping China and Rome apart so they could control the long-distance trade themselves. They sat athwart one of only two routes along which precious goods could flow. This overland route was the shorter option. The longer and more circuitous one went by sea around southeast Asia, across the Indian Ocean, and up the Arabian coast. But much like the Parthians on land, other merchants controlled that sea route and skimmed their profits off long before Roman goods got to China or vice versa. Direct contacts were rare. One of the better-known ones happened around AD 166, when a Roman delegation showed up in Vietnam, en route to pay a formal visit to the Han court. They said they were an embassy officially sent from Rome by a ruler called Antoninus. They may have been merely private traders who had come the whole way and reasoned that they would get a better reception if they claimed an imperial imprimatur.²

The Han and Roman empires anchored opposite ends of the so-called Silk Road. Ban Chao's conquests had brought the Chinese frontier the farthest westward it had yet gone. A few years later, by AD 106, Rome's expansion had brought its own control of the trade routes right up to the Euphrates in the Middle East. The Parthians sat in the middle, with little of their own to trade but enjoying a lucrative position as middlemen. The most important trade, in silk, reached its peak in the early decades of the century. Relative peace now meant that silk coming from China had to pass very few frontier zones: just the tip of the Kushan empire, centred on northern India, and Parthia itself. And demand for silk was great. The Romans had been silk consumers over the couple of centuries that their empire had been expanding. Julius Caesar himself had had silk curtains. Wealthy Roman women wore silk as the height of fashion. The silk trade went in both directions, though few realised as much at the time. Chinese merchants sold heavy silk fabric to the Parthians and sometimes bought from them something described as Roman silk, a fine gauzy material that the Parthians said came from animals only found in the Mediterranean. In fact, some

of the heavy Chinese silk reached Syria, was painstakingly unravelled and rewoven by skilled craftsmen, and then was sold back to the Chinese at a hefty mark-up.³

More typical Roman exports were flax linen, fine glassware, coral jewelry, and gold and silver from the mines of Spain. Precious stones also were much appreciated. Some of the stones that found their way from Rome to China were not Roman, however. They were polished in Rome but had come via the merchants of Alexandria from their original sources in India. For the long-distance trading networks of the ancient world curved southward as well. Roman coins flowed in abundance into India in exchange for local products. And just as such emissaries as Gan Ying tried to connect China and Rome, so too did Indian and Roman ambassadors circulate from time to time and bring back fragments of knowledge about distant lands. Often turmoil at the edges of empires, such as what Ban Chao had managed to suppress, disrupted trade. But this period, and the longer span of a few centuries from about 200 BC to AD 400, was one of the peaks of contact among the civilisations of Eurasia.⁴

Most contacts were indirect, as we have seen. The knowledge passed on secondhand or gained from occasional envoys did not add up to more than a hazy impression of very distant peoples. The Roman geographer Pliny the Elder wrote that ‘the Chinese, though mild in character, yet resemble wild animals, in that they also shun the company of the remainder of mankind, and wait for trade to come to them.’⁵ Chinese geographers of the same era underlined the difficulties of having to compile scraps of knowledge about places they had never seen personally. One of them, Yu Huan, mused that ‘[i]t is commonly believed that a fish living in a little stream does not know the size of the Yangzi River and the sea.’ He had a vague impression of Rome. ‘The common people are tall and virtuous like the Chinese.’ He had heard that Rome had no hereditary ruler and could depose bad ones at will.⁶ Between the Mediterranean and south Asia were other intermittent flows of influence. Some artistic styles and religious doctrines had rough parallels across the Greek–Persian–Indian zone, but how much was due to sustained contact and how much due to independent invention is hard to judge.⁷

The great civilisations of the time were bound together by threads of the silk trade and occasional exploration, but they had little real understanding of one another. Most of the deep knowledge in history has flowed vertically rather than horizontally, so to speak: it has come down within each civilisation rather than

across civilisations. The epoch of the Silk Road—with the Roman and Han empires at its ends, and the culturally flourishing but politically fragmented India to the south—has long been regarded as one of the most impressive in world history. These three civilisations always figure among the nineteen or so that such historians as Toynbee list. He noted that most of those nineteen were related to one another as parents or offspring, and that most civilisations that emerged in the past had already collapsed or been absorbed by the modern era.⁸ But these three arose independently of one another, and endured in one or another incarnation for dozens of generations.

Indeed, we might see them as three laboratories of the human experience. They arose on their own and had their own logic. They are each admired as jewels of the human heritage, with all manner of lasting spiritual, artistic, philosophical, and political achievements. Whatever each was in its peculiarity, however, it was also an arena in which people wrestled with some universal challenges. There was something placeless about what was happening in each civilisation even though it was placebound in practice. Serious thinkers and people of influence in ancient Rome, ancient India, or ancient China did not think they were living in one among nineteen particular civilisations that might one day be listed in a history book. They thought in terms of Civilisation with a capital C: that they were trying to live a civilised life in general, a life that best suited the needs of human beings as such.

This view of the world is best understood by starting from the inside and working our way outward. We have to grasp what each civilisation thought it was separately, before we can appreciate the parallels among them. But what is the inside whence we start? In any sophisticated society, most people will naturally say that an outsider wanting to know its highest ideals should talk to the most respected figures. When the trade of silk and other such goods was at its peak across Eurasia, the most respected figures would not be the traders themselves. They would be those who never ventured out of the comfort of their own cultural universe: people like the Roman patrician, the Confucian scholar-official, and the Hindu brahmin-priest.

Before going into what such people were and how they thought, I should offer a very clear disclaimer. Just because I often mention the ideals that they espoused does not mean that I want to paint a superhuman picture of them. Human failings are much the same across time and space. Many a person in history who claims to embody lofty ideals spends plenty of time doing everything from having affairs, to embezzling money, to thrashing subordinates,

to ignoring innocent misery. Ancient civilisations such as the Roman, the Chinese, and the Indian had their seedy sides and their hypocrisy.

Still, whatever the human failings lurking beneath the surface, the sort of people who were most esteemed in a given time and place do show something about prevailing cultural standards. Hypocrisy is, as the saying goes, the tribute that vice pays to virtue. We know something of the texture of a civilisation by understanding its ideals. Moreover, I do think that demanding ideals did have some impact on behaviour, even if at the margins only because of social pressure. A loose analogy might be modern efforts to intensify social disapproval of prejudices against one or another once disdained group of people. Even if some such opinions are merely driven underground, revealed only in private or kept in the heart of the culprit, I imagine modern liberals would still expect that some people's sentiments and behaviour genuinely are influenced by public norms. Ideals do matter.

Rome as a city was old by the time of the Silk Road's flourishing—supposedly founded by the mythical figure Romulus 700 years earlier—but its empire was quite new. The first century BC had witnessed political turmoil in which the Roman republic, basically a glorified city-state, had evolved into an empire. This was the grandest and most enduring political entity the Mediterranean had seen and was a touchstone of the European heritage until well into the early modern era. Not just the scale was impressive. Much of the imagery that has come down to us is of distinguished men more than of soldiers on the march. The political turmoil of the transition to empire involved intrigues in which statesmen manoeuvred around one another for honour and survival. Some came across as ambitious tyrants, others as upright defenders of liberty.

Perhaps the two most admired in the histories have been Cato the Younger and Cicero. In Plutarch's biography of Cato, he is depicted from childhood as having 'a nature that was inflexible, imperturbable, and altogether steadfast'.⁹ Despite his wealth, he lived in a remarkably austere fashion. A highly diligent official, he waged a one-man war on corruption when in power. And as a vigorous and untiring orator, he denounced the ambitions of Julius Caesar and others to destroy the republic and rule singlehandedly. The conspiracies swirling around him meant that fortunes could shift quite quickly. When his luck ran out in 46 BC and the new authorities were coming for him, he disembowelled himself rather than face the ignominy of capture.

Cicero met his end a mere three years later. From a similarly aristocratic family and as great an orator as Cato, he served as consul for a year in 63 BC. He

got entwined in the plots around Julius Caesar as well, and he has generally come across as a defender of republican liberty, though more likely than Cato to adjust his rhetoric to the moment. He eventually lost favour as well and was forced out of public life for three years, during which he took out his frustrations by writing a classic treatise on ethics called *On Duties*.¹⁰ Far from a dreamed-of return to politics, he eventually was tracked down much like Cato. But rather than taking his own life, he ended up being beheaded as he leaned out the window of his carriage on arrest. The new ruler, Mark Antony, put his head on display at the Forum at Rome. According to one version of events, Mark Antony's wife, Fulvia, irritated at Cicero's cutting rhetoric years earlier, added further insult by visiting the Forum and stabbing his tongue with her hairpin.

Bloody times are colourful, to be sure. But what comes down to us from such men as Cicero is not only the figures they cut in public but also the way they articulated the values and aspirations of their time. Cicero as statesman has mattered less for posterity than Cicero as writer. *On Duties*, written over a mere month in the autumn of 44 BC, a year before his death, is his most famous work and is filled with lofty ideals. His copious personal letters paint a complementary picture of him and the men of his class.¹¹ Ideals and realities often come into tension. Cicero's letters show more than a few instances of his being egotistical and worrying about others' opinions too much. Such failings perhaps make him a bit more human than the persona one would see in a polished speech about virtue.

More to the point, though, is that Cicero expresses the Roman virtues so well precisely because he was not mainly a philosopher. He was a man of action and sociability, articulate and reflective but also deeply enough engaged in his society to mirror what its gentlemen aspired to be. He was hardly an innovator striking out on his own against prevailing opinion. Indeed, he stressed as much in his writing. Established customs and the example of great men from the past were a sound guide to action, he argued. Just because a few admired figures had breached custom on occasion did not mean that one should do so lightly, thinking one knew better than the accumulated wisdom. In general, he thought the behaviour admired by Roman society would tend to line up with what he considered intrinsically virtuous.¹²

As a landed proprietor rooted in the soil—though obviously never deigning to work it with his own hands—Cicero was an inherently conservative figure of the Roman establishment. The image of virtue that he painted in *On Duties* was a recognisably Roman dignity on which Cato and others would agree. A

gentleman should eschew finery and affectation and avoid ‘listless sauntering’ and a ‘lack of poise’. One’s income could only respectably come from agriculture and a few other occupations suited to such dignity. The life of the merchant was by definition degrading, because it required huckstering and tended to provoke the ill will of customers. One should be magnanimous and generous, but not extravagant, with money.¹³

While he had his own moments of worrying about others’ opinion of him, Cicero stressed the difference between what was expedient and what was genuinely honourable. Much of *On Duties* is set up as an argument for acting virtuously and justly even when short-term interest might suggest otherwise. To make his case, he borrowed from Plato the story of the ring of Gyges. By putting on the ring, one could make oneself invisible and thus gain vast opportunity for deceiving others, holding all kinds of unjust advantage while still seeming a paragon of virtue. Cicero insisted that virtue was its own reward, even if vice would never be found out, simply because vice degraded one’s character. Just as the soul was more enduring than the mortal body, so should one reject fleeting pleasures and profits for the sake of bettering one’s true nature.¹⁴ Such ideas of virtue were solidly Roman, though they aligned with Greek philosophy. A couple of centuries earlier, Aristotle had proposed that ‘[t]he goods of the soul are not gained or maintained by external goods’.¹⁵ Cicero listed the specific virtues as wisdom, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Together they made up the character of a gentleman, which was more solid—more precious and slower to cultivate—than merely doing one or another desirable thing because the moment demanded it.

Though influenced by Aristotle—he translated much Greek philosophical vocabulary into Latin after his expulsion from politics—Cicero did not just regurgitate his ideas. For Aristotle and for many Greek intellectuals, life as an active and cultivated person might mean political leadership. The *polis*, or city-state, was a place both for forming virtuous citizens and for displaying one’s qualities. But Aristotle said that often the highest pursuit could be just sitting on one’s own and contemplating human and cosmic truths.¹⁶ For Cicero, the non-political life could never be so satisfying. He took his withdrawal from active statesmanship quite hard. From all his writings about the importance of sociability and active citizenship, one gets the impression that the worst torture would have been to lock him in a room by himself. One could live virtuously in private life, to be sure, and one should take philosophy seriously as a guide. But having private contemplation as one’s sole pursuit struck him as little more than

‘selfish inactivity’.¹⁷

Such men as Cicero and Cato naturally found it challenging to apply the established Roman ideas about virtue to the cutthroat political environment of their time. Even on the most personal level, deciding how much to adapt to circumstance was no easy matter. Cato simply dug in and inveighed against the laxity and craftiness around him, taking more satisfaction in an honourable death than in compromise. Cicero shared his moral vantage point but agonised more over the practical consequences of decisions. In a letter to his friend Atticus in 60 BC, he wrote of his admiration for Cato’s stubborn idealism. But he added that sometimes Cato seemed to think he was living in a perfect world like Plato’s Republic, rather than among wily politicians ‘on Romulus’ dunghill’.¹⁸ Cicero thought that sometimes idealistic decisions could harm the state. Of course, in keeping with his other principles, he was not mainly counselling acting out of self-interest so much as taking a hard look at what could be realised in practice.

On a broader scale, the Roman political universe at the time also posed new challenges for anyone trying to act ethically. In the century before Julius Caesar’s grab for power—the two centuries before Gan Ying tried to come westward to visit—Rome’s reach had expanded tremendously. It had started as a city-state not unlike the many others of the Italian and Greek peninsulae. While rather a backward cousin during the time when Greek culture predominated, it had still been the same sort of entity as Athens or other small polities. Despite slavery and other inequalities within, it had been on a modest enough scale for direct citizen participation, of the sort that had inspired Aristotle to declare that ‘man is a political animal’.¹⁹

Much like other empires, Rome’s was acquired gradually and largely by accident. A series of security threats and short-term pressures had drawn Rome into the eastern Mediterranean, overcoming the Greek city-states about a hundred years before Cicero and Cato.²⁰ And about the same time, it finally defeated its arch-rival in the west, the commercial hub of Carthage on the north African coast. By the time Rome became an empire in name, it was already one in fact. It controlled all shores of the Mediterranean (literally the sea in the middle of the earth), turning it into a secure Roman lake. Around it were dotted Roman cities in a web of economic and cultural influence.

The reality of empire was something of an accident. But the idea of empire usually finds a birth certificate after the fact, and in this Rome was no exception. The founding epic of Rome, the *Aeneid*, was written some twenty years after Cicero and Cato died. It tells of a destiny that took centuries to fulfil. Supposedly

after the Greeks defeated Troy with the famous wooden-horse trick, Aeneas and a few other survivors from the Trojan royal family fled far across the Mediterranean. Their wanderings eventually took them to Italy, where Aeneas became the ancestor of the Romans. The epic thus linked together the fate of the Mediterranean's diverse peoples, just as it contained a prophecy of Rome's universal dominion.²¹

The zone under Roman rule included more than just Rome and its Latin culture, therefore. It was also partly Greek, the product of long-term Greek settlement and influence around the sea. Some of the older-style, more austere Romans found Greek high culture a bit too self-indulgent and over-intellectualising, even effeminate, for their tastes. But networks of patronage and learning, and the influence of enslaved Greeks who became tutors in Rome, gradually overcame resistance. By Cicero's time, mastery of both Latin and Greek was *de rigueur* for the educated, who could communicate in code over monolingual heads. Even the virtues merged in what many saw as the best of both worlds: Roman gravitas and martiality, plus Greek wisdom and curiosity.²²

The challenge facing Rome as a new empire went beyond incorporating all these cultural influences. It also meant rethinking the political conditions for virtuous citizenship. The old city-states, both Italian and Greek, had rested on direct participation by those free men who counted as citizens. The whole point of republican government was having no distinction between rulers and ruled, because all men of a certain standing would rotate in office.²³ Cicero and Cato were fighting to defend republicanism against the servile subjecthood they saw eastward in imperial Persia. Yet Rome as an empire could hardly sustain such a model of direct citizenship, even though formal citizen status was extended first to other Italians, then to Greeks, and eventually beyond. The new empire settled at first on a non-hereditary monarchy, with power divided between the senate and the emperor as a kind of dictator for life. As time went on, the balance shifted within what was in principle a mixed government with power concentrating in the hands of the emperors, who eventually became more or less hereditary. Yet vestiges of equal citizenship lingered, and the emperor never became wholly an absolute ruler: his command of the army and cult of personality were never taken as far within Rome itself as in the provinces.²⁴

The details of political institutions matter less for our purposes here than the breakthrough in imagination prompted by Rome's universal dominion. The virtues of a Roman gentleman were quite clear, more or less as Cicero had articulated them. But what were the virtues of a citizen of the whole known

world? Ironically, despite Cicero's battles against the formal shift to empire, later emperors, including Julius Caesar's own nephew Augustus, tended to admire him. One of the most ethically conscious emperors and one of the best-known to posterity was Marcus Aurelius, who reigned from 161 to 180. Many of his thoughts come down to us in the *Meditations*, a notebook of spiritual exercises that he wrote in the troubled last decade of his life while overseeing wars on the northern frontier. 'My city and state are Rome—as Antoninus. But as a human being? The world.' To be philosophically minded was to try to live 'as a citizen of that higher city, of which all other cities are mere households'. All cultivated human beings, whatever their political or cultural allegiance, were united by 'not blood, or birth, but mind'.²⁵

The musings of Marcus Aurelius came partly out of his own disquiet, but also out of a long tradition of Greek thought that had gained ground in the Roman empire. As far back as the fifth century BC, Socrates had said that wisdom was universal. Perhaps the masses did not share the wisdom of the discerning few, but among the wise there was no distinction of country. Later, the Stoics had staked out a very clear cosmopolitanism. Using quasi-religious language, they argued that the moral sense was truly universal. One's duties to one's own soul and to some vague understanding of God took priority over any political loyalties. The Stoics tended to withdraw from worldly political concerns; world citizenship was an abstract ideal with no blueprint for realising it in practice. But the consolidation of Rome as an empire encompassing the known world pushed many Stoics, including eventually Marcus Aurelius, to imagine a political cosmopolitanism as well. Human unity was more concrete than before now that a kind of cross-cultural world-state in miniature had come on to the scene.²⁶

Rome had lost the fellowship and civic equality of the city-state. At the same time, it had gained something different and still inchoate: a universal political space. Of course, the cosmopolitan ideal and the reality of an existing political community came into tension. The usual way of thinking about it, among those who took both seriously, was to compartmentalise. Thus Marcus Aurelius could be both emperor, doing battle with barbarians on the frozen frontier in northern Europe, and philosopher-king scribbling in his notebooks about his place in the cosmos. Even in the early days of imperial consolidation, Cicero had distinguished between a philosophical approach to truth and a political approach to it. He pointed to

this general difference between these two classes of great men, namely

philosophers and politicians, that among the former, the development of the principles of nature is the subject of their study and eloquence; and among the latter, national laws and institutions form the principal topics of investigation.²⁷

One could work down from the universal or up from the particular, perhaps meeting in the middle. This was also the logic of Greco-Roman ideas about natural law, the moral principles that applied to all humanity and trumped political practice. Natural law transcended citizenship, serving as a moral inspiration that would have to be realised in the laws of each political community.²⁸

Even the grandest of empires, with the grandest of aspirations, rise and fall. The Roman and Han empires both lasted over four centuries before their collapse. And much as in Rome, the ideas that defined Han high culture had their roots hundreds of years before the empire and would outlive it in turn. Where Rome had got much of its inspiration from the Greek city-states, the Han empire drew on the cultural efflorescence of the Warring States period three centuries earlier, when China's division into several countries left plenty of room for intellectual ferment. That was when the body of thought known as Confucianism had arisen, to be adopted much later by the Han emperors as official doctrine. As the empire's dominant philosophy, Confucianism was central to the learning of the aristocracy of scholar-officials. Indeed, they sometimes had to prove their mastery of it in rudimentary examinations, the forerunner of the officeholders' examinations that had thousands of young Chinese gentlemen writing flowery essays in cramped cubicles a thousand years later.

Confucianism's start had been inauspicious. Confucius lost his parents at a young age, grew up in poverty and spent much of his life wandering from state to state trying in vain to find a ruler who might heed his ethical teachings. His disciples preserved many of his sayings, which come across more as aphorisms than as systematic argument. Two generations later, Mencius developed the same strands of thought further in an idealistic picture of human beings' potential for living virtuously. A little later still, Xunzi wrote perhaps the most detailed statement of Confucian principles, including advice on how rituals and discipline could shape human nature in the desired direction. None of these early thinkers fared well personally amid the political turmoil of the time. Xunzi, for example, served for a while as a teacher in one kingdom, then had to leave after being insulted. He managed to get an official appointment in another state, but

that ruler soon was assassinated and Xunzi lost his post. Life was less kind to the early Confucians than later history would be.

Because of the level of detail in the writings of Mencius and Xunzi, they conveyed the spirit of Confucianism more fully than had Confucius himself. Much like the ancient Greeks and Romans, Mencius called his readers to live virtuously: 'That whereby the superior man is distinguished from other men is what he preserves in his heart; namely, benevolence and propriety.' Permit your better rather than your worse impulses, and your efforts will be reflected in the character that others see: 'Those who follow that part of themselves which is great are great men; those who follow that part which is little are little men.' Only a few could reach such a level of distinction, through years of learning and demanding much of themselves. Then they could be resilient amid the world's adversity:

They are only men of education who, without a certain livelihood, are able to maintain a fixed heart. As for the people, if they have not a certain livelihood ... there is nothing which they will not do, in the way of self-abandonment, of moral deflection, of depravity, and of wild licence.

The compass and the square produce perfect circles and squares. By the sages, the human relations are perfectly exhibited.'²⁹

Mencius thought that while few people could realise it in practice, this potential was built into human nature and would come out naturally if society did not deform it. Xunzi felt that virtue was much harder to attain. He argued that untamed human nature was hardly a pretty sight and that only through careful training and respect for ritual could character be shaped properly. His stress on social norms and habituation made him much more a spokesman of established society, and probably more representative of how later generations practised Confucianism. Perhaps Xunzi was Cicero to Mencius's Cato, or Aristotle to Mencius's Plato, so to speak.

Learning was crucial:

A piece of wood straight as a plumbline can, by steaming, be made pliable enough to bend into the shape of a wheel rim.... In broadening his learning, the gentleman each day examines himself so that his awareness will be discerning and his actions without excess.

Just as Cicero saw custom as a guide to living well, so did Xunzi urge painstaking study of past wisdom. Learning ‘should start with the recitation of the Classics and conclude with the reading of the Rituals. Its real purpose is first to create a scholar and in the end to create a sage.’ He agreed with Cicero also on the value of honour over expediency, of being virtuous rather than just seeming so. ‘The learning of the gentleman is used to refine his character. The learning of the petty man is used like ceremonial offerings of birds and calves’—in other words, to gain worldly fortune.³⁰

The imperative to act rather than just to study in solitude was also strikingly similar from the Mediterranean to China. Mencius claimed that ‘[t]here is no attribute of the superior man greater than his helping men to practise virtue.’ A decent society needed virtue at the top. ‘The principle which the superior man holds is that of personal cultivation, but the kingdom is thereby tranquillised.’ ‘[O]nly the benevolent ought to be in high stations. When a man destitute of benevolence is in a high station, he thereby disseminates his wickedness among all below him.’³¹ This image of the virtuous scholar-official impressed itself on Chinese high culture for two thousand years. While the folk tradition confined the scope of duty to one’s own family, the Confucianism of the educated classes called those in power to a much grander responsibility. Inwardly, one should ‘rectify oneself’; outwardly, one should ‘govern the country and pacify what lies under Heaven’.³² Perhaps this was more scholarly and bureaucratic than the image of the Roman patrician declaiming in the Senate, but the essence was the same. The Chinese may have worn robes rather than togas, but their stature is recognisable.

By the time the Han empire had consolidated itself and adopted Confucianism, gentlemen who took such ideas seriously had ample scope for action. The empire had political reach comparable to that of Rome. In one sense, the two realms were mirror images of each other. While the Roman empire was centred on the Mediterranean, the ‘sea in the middle of land’, China was a ‘land in the middle of seas’. Confucius had said in the *Analects* that ‘all within the four seas’ would be brothers if they upheld the proper standards.³³ Two of the seas were real seas with water, to the east and south of the Chinese coast. The other two were seas of sand and empty steppe, to the north and west.

To this land amid the four seas, political unification had not come easily. The strength of Ban Chao’s army when it finally occupied the Tarim Basin belied the long history of getting there. He appreciated the past better than most, because his father and brother were distinguished court historians. His father started, and

his brother finished, the definitive official history of the Han dynasty's origins. Just as the Roman empire had emerged from many small city-states along the northern Mediterranean, so had China been through many political vicissitudes before its unification.

Largely mythical stories of early dynasties mark China's origin in kingdoms along the Yellow River basin. The cultural universe expanded, albeit with very loose political organisation. In the first half of the first millennium BC, the Zhou dynasty (1040–256 BC) had a kind of loose ritual preeminence, though real power resided with regional rulers whose kingdoms went their own way in practice. Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi lived during the cutthroat struggles of the Warring States period (475–221 BC), when ambitious kings manoeuvred around one another in a struggle to dominate the Chinese heartland. The first real unity came in 221 BC, when the rough Qin dynasty completed its conquest from the west and subjugated all other kingdoms. It was a shortlived dynasty, collapsing after a mere fifteen years largely because of its brutality. The Qin were a Machiavellian bunch, espousing not Confucianism but rather a hard-edged philosophy called Legalism. Legalism was eerily modern in its tough emphasis on raw power and wealth, which undoubtedly helped the Qin to conquer their rivals. In power, the Qin rulers did not soften their approach. They suppressed Confucianism and killed countless intellectuals whose ideas about ethics got in the way of statebuilding.

When the Han dynasty inherited a unified China from the Qin, it took a very different tack. As the history written by Ban Chao's father and brother recounted, the Qin had failed because they had violated the ethical order of things. Only a virtuous ruler, with virtuous officials around him, deserved power. This elaboration of Confucian political ethics happened early in the Han dynasty, largely through the work of Dong Zhongshu, a minor court official remembered through the influential memorials he wrote to Emperor Wu, who formally adopted Confucianism during his long reign of fifty-four years (141–87 BC). Where the early Confucian thinkers had offered a diffuse vision of how to cultivate virtue, Dong Zhongshu fleshed out the emperor's role as linchpin of the new state. The emperor was a kind of cosmic contact point linking heaven, earth, and humanity. In shades of Marcus Aurelius, his sovereignty was more than just a focus of administrative power. It also entailed responsibility for keeping ethical order in a universal state.³⁴ There is a saying: 'No two suns in the sky, no two rulers for the people.' Unlike the Qin, who had tried to destroy the ethical foundations of Chinese culture, the Han dynasty would try to spread virtuous

living downward and outward. Officials would be chosen in part based on how well they knew the Confucian classics.

The Han empire would break up in 220 under the pressure of military intrigues and peasant revolts. But much like Rome, it defined the political culture of its part of the world for centuries to follow. The Han merging of imperial unity and Confucian thought would endure long beyond the dynasty itself. Much like silk threads radiating out in a web, the idea of a cultural universe bound together all within the Chinese sphere. Those most deeply committed to Chinese civilisation saw it not as merely a particular culture or a particular polity. They saw it as a cluster of universal insights and the way of life that embodied them. Those values applied to the *Tiānxià* (天下), the world of 'all under Heaven'. By the end of the Han, this term no longer meant just the vast territory under the emperor's rule. It meant something like humanity as such, to which Confucian ideals had something to offer.³⁵

And there could be no mistake about where ultimate allegiance lay. Any specific ruler and his officials might have a stake in defending their state. But educated and civilised people had a broader and higher duty to defend the world under Heaven. While educated officials served their rulers, they mightily resisted any efforts to turn them into passive tools of governance. They were carriers of the dignity of a civilisation. This also meant that rulers could come and go. Even dynasties of non-Chinese ethnic origin, such as the Mongols and the Manchus much later, could reign over China if they upheld the ethical precepts of the world under Heaven. At least in theory, a conscience-bound scholar-official should serve a ruler based on what the ruler did rather than who he was.³⁶

So far we have seen some striking common ground between the western and eastern ends of Eurasia two thousand years ago. To the south, the third major civilisation of the period was Hindu India. No single empire ruled it at the time, and in a strict sense no one state ever did before modern times. India was always more loosely organised politically than Europe or China. It was bound together instead by religion and culture, in a balance of unity and diversity. And to appreciate the Indian parallels to what we have seen in Rome and China, it is important to appreciate that Hinduism saw a variety of human purposes interlocking in a kind of cosmic order. Different people had different stations, just as life itself had different stages.

The classic summary of the social expectations of ancient Hinduism is the *Laws of Manu*, a religious text of unknown authorship that came together sometime in the two centuries BC or AD, in other words roughly when the

Roman and Han empires were being consolidated. Much like the other two civilisations, India had been through a time of social upheaval and intellectual ferment. The *Laws of Manu* were a response to that uncertainty, a restatement of orthodoxy and strict standards of *dharma* (personal conduct). The text subsequently became a touchstone for two millennia of Hindu religious and social life.

In the *Laws of Manu*, people are expected to live in a hierarchy, with divine sanction for their different roles and duties. At the top of the hierarchy stands not a secular ruler, but rather the priest, the brahmin, who is born to preside over rituals and uphold sacred laws.³⁷ The four-fold caste-based hierarchy that we have come to associate with Hinduism dates back to this and even earlier writings, even though some historians say it may have been less rigid in the beginning.³⁸ Still, most later readers of the *Laws of Manu* have seen it as an apology for the preeminence of brahmins. It is probably no more—and no less—so than high culture Confucianism was an apology for scholar-officials, or Cicero’s writing an apology for patricians. Inevitably, the ideals of any system of thought are refracted through the experience, status, and interests of the people who compile it. We can read them for signs of self-interest, or we can read them for principles that they believed transcended their own circumstances. The latter is probably more useful to us in a very different setting, especially when the same structures and interests do not really survive.

Like Cicero and Xunzi, the *Laws of Manu* urged study of past wisdom. A young brahmin would spend the first quarter of his life learning the sacred text of the Veda. Sources of wisdom had their own hierarchy. ‘The whole Veda is the [first] source of the sacred law, next the tradition and the virtuous conduct of those who know the [Veda further], also the customs of holy men, and [finally] self-satisfaction.’³⁹ Just as in Rome and China, we see an awareness that the goal is real virtue rather than superficial acquisition. It was better to know only a little of the sacred texts and take them seriously, learning how to control one’s impulses, than to memorise volumes but fall prey to vices such as gluttony and huckstering. Moreover, wisdom should be honoured more than wealth. One should make a modest living through honourable work and be content with one’s learning and virtue, rather than chasing riches for self-indulgence.⁴⁰

An educated Hindu was also called to social responsibility. This duty may have been less politically inflected than for a Roman aristocrat or Chinese official, but it was no less vital in keeping the world in order. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, a later but no less important text of Hinduism, we are told that ‘[w]hatever

the superior man does, so do the rest; whatever standard he sets the world follows it.’⁴¹ Just as the Confucians were urged to blend self-cultivation and political action, so did the *Gita* pull together two sides of life. It appeared in the aftermath of controversy in India between those who felt that true happiness came from meditation and withdrawing from the world and others who insisted on carrying out one’s duties in society. The *Gita* struck a balance. On the one hand, one should cultivate one’s own spirituality. On the other hand, when acting to do one’s duty, one should avoid getting too caught up in whether action bears fruit, which one cannot really control.⁴²

Despite India’s political disunity—and the distance between brahmins and those, largely of the *ksatriya* or warrior caste, who actually ruled—these texts do offer some political counsel. In the *Laws of Manu*, the ideal king is a ‘just inflicter of punishment’ who will keep society functioning. He is ‘the protector of the castes (*varna*) and orders, who, all according to their rank, discharge their several duties’.⁴³ Ethical order in society counted for more than state institutions. Indeed, Hindu political thought has very little to say about the state as a distinct entity. Historical experience tended to reinforce this neglect. The Kushan empire in the north, which touched on the Silk Road during Roman and Han times, was a mountain-centred realm with no control over much of the subcontinent. The largest empire in previous Indian history had been that of Asoka, who reigned for forty years from 273 BC. His territory also did not reach to the far south. During his reign, Asoka converted to Buddhism, which had its origins as an offshoot of Hinduism and shared many of the same ideals. Much like Marcus Aurelius, he tried as a philosopher-king to apply his ethical precepts to governing. But rather than embarking on conquests, he sought mainly to spread Buddhism via missionaries that he despatched far and wide, including to Greek city-states in the Middle East.⁴⁴

Perhaps the most enduring marker of Hindu cultural universalism was language. Sanskrit was for centuries the medium of Hindu high culture. Local languages like Tamil might record everyday transactions, but only Sanskrit could interpret the world. It was the language of sacred texts like the Vedas. Its prestige was bound up with its content and with those who used it. Only the priests and other traditional intellectuals mastered it, making it ‘exclusively the cosmopolitan language of elite self-presentation’. As one historian of the language has observed, Sanskrit marked a distinct class of people rather than binding all classes together in one culture. ‘Their “nation” operated more like a

private club than a folk with lore.’⁴⁵

All three parts of the world mentioned so far had much in common in how they defined civilisation. They had their differences, to be sure. China was the most politically unified for the long term, India the least, and Rome and its later offshoots somewhere in the middle. The tone of the high culture may have been a bit more bureaucratic in China, a bit more religious in India, and a bit more martial, or at least politically assertive, in Rome. But the virtues to which serious people in each civilisation aspired were strikingly similar in content, structure, and method of acquisition. Because texts and education were so important, elite languages—classical Greek and Latin, classical Chinese, and classical Sanskrit—played a crucial role in transmitting the tradition and marking off who was inside and who was outside. Vital too was the idea—sometimes vague and honoured only in the breach—that truth and power were two different things. Yes, political institutions, including the awesome authority of an empire where possible, should put their weight behind the proper ethical order. But that ethical order was also supposed to transcend power. Power that flouted the tradition would be illegitimate and would fall sooner or later.

Imagine that we pluck three representatives of these civilisations—a Roman patrician, an Indian brahmin, and a Chinese scholar-official—out of their comfortable universes around AD 100 and deposit them in a room together. Perhaps they could share an appreciation of the Chinese silk hangings on the wall, the fine Roman glasses out of which they drink, or the Indian precious stones on their rings. Their mutual understanding might run deeper still. They might recognise some similarities of outlook, even though they would be very conscious of the differences of language and detail that divide them.

Truly understanding each other would be hard at that stage, however. For one thing, they would never have met anyone like one other. Each of these civilisations was a universe unto itself. One historian of civilisations has pointed out that any society on that scale—of which there were several between the end of the Stone Age and modern times—had a unique ‘cultural amplitude’. It had plenty of internal space for different types of callings, and for human nature to unfold in a variety of directions. Sophisticated urban life, for the one-tenth or so of people who were not ploughing and harvesting, offered the conditions for cultural diversity. Within any great tradition, intellectual and cultural currents could diverge from one another somewhat despite some common themes. One could even find a reasonable tolerance of eccentricity most of the time for mystics, artists, and the like. Yet tolerance was largely internal. Most such

people had no experience whatsoever of anything outside their own universe.⁴⁶ Each civilisation was Civilisation, so to speak.

On one level, this attitude will seem astoundingly arrogant. But we should understand the nature of this arrogance if we are to think through how it might become something more promising. It helps to consider what such people took pride in representing. I mean not just the specific virtues they thought were worth cultivating—on which they would largely have agreed—but the way each set of beliefs hung together and demanded assent. The historian Toynbee noted a crucial difference between civilisations and so-called ‘primitive societies’. In primitive societies, people want to imitate elders and ancestors. Custom presses on each generation as something taken for granted, something best grasped by those who have spent the longest living by it. Such small-scale societies are rather static. Civilisations, by contrast, redirect such admiration—mimesis, Toynbee called it—away from run-of-the-mill elders and towards creative personalities such as philosophers and prophets. Because these new elites shatter blind custom in order to pursue truth, civilisations are more dynamic. Much of the energy persists over the generations, as the most educated and creative souls rethink what their tradition means and how to apply it.⁴⁷

This was, at the time, a remarkably new way of thinking about one’s place in the world. It arose more or less simultaneously across the eastern Mediterranean, northern India, and northern China. The philosopher Karl Jaspers has called this period, the Axial Age between about 800 and 200 BC, ‘the most deepcut dividing line in history’. Why it happened is a complex question, probably having to do with new social structures. But its crucial effect was the rise of so-called ‘second-order thinking’, or ‘thought about thought’. Prophets and philosophers stepped back from the customs that had come down through the ages and asked instead what was absolutely true for human beings as such. This move broke the unquestioned authority of elders and rulers and transferred it to the priests and intellectuals who could carry on a new tradition of thought.⁴⁸ In some cases, as we shall see, the new tradition in itself became a burdensome source of conformity as it imposed itself on its followers. But it never fully lost its critical energy. What was true could no longer be conflated with what simply existed. Questions had a habit of asking themselves again and again.

The patrician, brahmin, and scholar-official felt that they were on to something, so to speak. To be sure, claiming to know something about truth did lend them prestige in the societies over which they presided. But truth can also be a humbling force if people take it seriously. Conflating one’s own ideals with

Civilisation itself had the promise, at least in theory, of holding the powerful to account. Just as the Romans thought natural law trumped imperial law, and the Confucians thought the highest loyalty was to Heaven rather than to a specific ruler, so can we read in the *Laws of Manu* that '[a]ll rites ordained in the Veda, burnt oblations and [other] sacrifices, pass away; but know that the syllable [Om] is imperishable, and [it is] Brahman [and] the Lord of creatures [Prajapati].'⁴⁹

In this view of the world, standards of ethics were absolute, placeless, and timeless. The institutions and customs of any society were crystallisations of truth. This gave their defenders a confidence that could be heartening or exasperating, depending on how one looks at it. More broadly, by this stage in world history the civilisations had reached what I shall call a 'first-order universalism'. If you are a first-order universalist, you see your own way of life and ideals as valuable because they are *true*, not just because they are *yours*. You are civilised because you have, or at least try to have, the virtues. While you may well believe that your own civilisation is superior, you profess to put cause and effect the right way round. In principle, you think you owe it allegiance because it is superior, not that it is superior because it happens to be yours. Civilisation is a yardstick that exists independently of who one is. Or to put it another way, you are not civilised merely because you happen to live on a particular territory or belong to a particular clan or people.

You have already come a long way to being a citizen of the world. Now you just need to turn your attention to thinking about exactly what world that is, and who else is a citizen of it.



The Great Wall of China near Mutianyu. Photo by Nicolas Perrault, July 2006.

3 Beyond the Frontiers

If you think yourself civilised, you will realise sooner or later that not everyone is so. This does not refer mainly to the lower strata within each ancient society. Ask a Roman patrician, a Chinese scholar-official, or a Hindu brahmin about his servants or those he might dismiss as the rabble in the street. He would say that of course they are uncivilised, either by nature or because not everyone has the temperament or leisure to cultivate a higher style of life. He might then temper the observation by adding that they at least recognise the same standards, and generally acknowledge the proper hierarchies. Such people are not a real challenge to his view of the world. He would find it much harder to make sense of true outsiders, people beyond his cultural universe who do not identify with it at all. If truth is for human beings as such, how can any human beings ignore it? Who were these odd folk ignorant of truth, and distant from the way of life that crystallised it? They were the barbarians beyond the frontier. If you imagined that such barbarians could become civilised—that your civilisation was not only true in itself, but also open to anyone who accepted it—then you would have reached the stage of a second-order universalism.

This time, let us start with China. The self-consciousness of a frontier, of an inside and an outside, has been unusually strong there historically. One historian has suggested that of all the world's civilisations, China before modern times had its sense of centrality disrupted the least. The 'Middle Kingdom' was more or less isolated amid the 'four seas' of water and sand and steppe, 'an empire without comparable neighbours'. While a few exotic influences such as Buddhism did find their way in over the centuries, they did not transform China's own coherent culture. Its writing system, art, and philosophy evolved more or less on their own.¹ An educated Chinese person would take for granted that everything really worth cultivating came from within China.

Geography had much to do with this pattern. Climate and terrain drew natural boundaries between the Chinese heartland—more or less the core area occupied

by the Han empire—and the frontier zones of Manchuria, Mongolia, Turkestan, and Tibet. Within the frontier were millions of densely settled peasants on their small plots. Beyond the frontier were stretches of land with little rainfall, poor soil, and nomads eking out a living. Different livelihoods carried with them different institutions and mentalities. By the time of the Han dynasty, many Chinese saw these fault lines not only as dividing geographic zones but also as cosmic boundaries between civilisation and barbarism.²

Neither side could just draw a line and have done with it. Nomads and settled people needed to interact with each other and keep an uneasy peace. Short-lived states founded by nomads such as the Xiongnu needed more wealth to redistribute to their followers than they could create themselves. Raids along the frontier of the kind that Ban Chao and other generals tried to stop were one way to loot surplus. Ideally, both sides preferred a more peaceful arrangement in which wealth could flow across the frontier through trade and tribute. From the nomads' perspective, China was easiest to deal with when it had a unified empire run by scholar-officials who would make deals. From the Chinese viewpoint, nomads were best managed by bribing them to keep the peace. Moderately strong nomadic kingdoms could act as a buffer, keeping their followers in order while being unable to threaten China proper. If they had to fight anyone, they could spend their energy battling each other rather than pillaging the heartland. The courts of the Han and later empires sent luxurious gifts and wives to coopt barbarian chieftains. If done right, this was a win-win situation, in which both sides avoided the burdens of trying to conquer and control too far into the opposite zone.³

In the early Han empire, during the long reign of Emperor Wu and two hundred years before Ban Chao's victory in the Tarim Basin, another traveller named Zhang Qian had laid the groundwork for this system of managing barbarians. He did not journey as far as Gan Ying, but he did make contact with both nomads and more settled peoples on the fringes of the empire, particularly westward into parts of Persia and the mountains of south-central Asia. He recorded the natural wonders and odd customs he saw on his wanderings. The temporary alliances formed with local rulers served their purpose as far as security was concerned. They also fitted into a plan for spreading Confucian values far and wide. He predicted that 'a territory 10,000 *li* [4000 kilometres] in extent would be available for the spread among the Four Seas of our superior Chinese civilisation by communicating through many interpreters with the nations holding widely different customs'. Ambassadors from barbarian

kingdoms could also visit China to see its glory firsthand.⁴

The system of paying tribute defined Chinese foreign relations for over 2000 years. Ties were always bilateral, with one vassal at a time. Tributary states were generally treated equally, on the same level as one another but all inferior to China as the civilised centre of the world. The language used to describe these arrangements mapped on to the larger Confucian worldview. Ambassadors from afar would do obeisance to the emperor as the symbol of cosmic order and would be treated with a kind of benign paternalism. Harmony and hierarchy within China were mirrored in how vassals beyond the frontier recognised their place at the periphery of civilisation. China's cultural influence and the prestige of the emperor radiated outward to the deserts and steppes and mountains, even though the imperial bureaucracy usually could not reach into such far-flung territories.⁵

The frontier fluctuated over the centuries, depending on the strength of any given dynasty and the level of organisation among the nomads. Emperor Wu's ambitions for an ever larger empire swiftly proved unrealistic for later generations. The Chinese universe had its natural limits. Any gains sooner or later proved expensive and shortlived. After Ban Chao's death, the Xiongnu gradually moved back in to reclaim the Tarim Basin. Still later in the Han dynasty, control of the entire northern frontier began unravelling as more and more Chinese settlers gave up on such an inhospitable environment.⁶

As a fallback strategy, some later dynasties relied on the Great Wall, which ran for nearly 9000 kilometres along the northern edge of China proper. It fell apart and was rebuilt several times over the centuries, but the basic approach remained the same. Against highly mobile nomads who would sweep in on horseback to pillage, the Great Wall was a useful delaying mechanism that gave some strategic depth. Of course, how well it worked depended on its state of repair, the manpower kept on duty, and the military reserves that could be called swiftly into action in case it was breached. Marking off the frontier also meant that settled peasants inside it could be kept under control. Just as the empire found it hard to master the nomads with their scattered way of life, so too did it have to worry about independently-minded Han farmers moving out of its orbit.⁷

This equilibrium lasted long enough to impress itself on the Chinese elite's imagination. While the frontier constantly shifted and every dynasty's hour of collapse came sooner or later, overall China spent about two-thirds of its history politically unified and covering roughly the same area: nearly all the heartland and some of the nomadic regions. Small wonder that the idea of a Sinocentric

cultural universe, with barbarians paying tribute to the centre, seemed so natural. In the most cosmopolitan of Chinese dynasties, the Tang, the number of visible foreigners surged. Monks, merchants, and entertainers from distant lands flocked to the capital at Chang'an. The founder's son, Taizong, drew freely on the military tactics and symbols of the central Asian nomads and even adopted the Turkish title of 'Heavenly Qaghan' alongside that of Chinese emperor. This 'dual empire' did not forget the cultural chasm between Chinese and barbarians, however, and there was no doubt about which way was up.⁸

That outlook did have to compromise with hard realities from time to time, however. The fortunes of the Chinese centre waxed and waned over the centuries. The stronger the tribes on the periphery, the less easily the scholar-officials could get away with treating them with condescension. They would sometimes make gestures at a rough equality, while playing up the usual language of tribute for domestic consumption. Such compromises with reality were often a long time coming, given the mental block that many Chinese officials had about treating barbarians as equals.⁹

The most well-known departure from the tributary system happened in the tenth century. The Tang dynasty had recently collapsed, and regional kingdoms were vying for the mantle as its successor. Eventually two power centres emerged: the Song in most of eastern China and the Liao in the north and in eastern Mongolia. The Liao, also known as the Khitan, were rather more loosely organised and had more of the social patterns of the frontier, including even more non-Chinese ethnic influences than had been the case under the Tang. Yet both dynasties claimed to be the heir of the Tang. For about a century, neither could gain the upper hand. The hard fact of an unprecedented equality between states, both of which had an imperial air about them, was recognised reluctantly in two treaties of 1005 and 1042. The two rulers addressed one another in a brotherly fashion, as 'northern' and 'southern' dynasties. From the perspective of the Song, with their control over the cultural core of China, this admission was all the more grating because of the Liao position on the frontier and their barbarian ethnic admixture. Despite the diplomatic politeness and statements that the Liao were much more cultured than earlier northerners, many Song court officials still clung to the old view that barbarians should recognise their betters. Some of the internal court memos let fly and called the Liao 'dogs and goats'.¹⁰

Perhaps the Song–Liao exception proved the rule. If one believes that one's own way of life is Civilisation, then one can only argue over how closely others conform to it. The Song could grudgingly treat the Liao as equals on the basis

that they were culturally the same. Those who fell within the civilisation's frontier and shared the same aspirations could be included. The farther out one got, the less that basis of respect could hold up. And the easiest insult to someone distant from one's own institutions, such as an independent state, would be to say that such people were not really part of the cultural universe. Thus Xunzi earlier had observed that customs varied as one moved from China's heartland out to the periphery. He thought it only natural that standards of proper behaviour would become less stringent. Barbarians could hardly be expected to meet the same high expectations, any more than one could get a starving person in a ditch to understand Confucian ideas about kingship.¹¹

As thinking moved toward a second-order universalism, two ways were envisioned by which outsiders could become insiders. The frontier of civilisation could move outward to include more people. Or individuals, attracted by Chinese culture, could draw closer to it and acquire the trappings of civilisation. In either case, the terrain sloped only one way. Mencius remarked that he had heard of Chinese changing barbarians but not the other way around.¹² This cultural magnetism meant that barbarians should 'come and be transformed' (来化 *láihuà*) by Chinese civilisation. Usually this conversion happened on a group level. A tribe on the frontier would gradually move up from tributary status, abandoning a nomadic lifestyle and taking up settled agriculture. As the process of 'incorporation' (内属 *nèishǔ*) advanced, they would be reclassified by officialdom from 'outer barbarians' to 'inner barbarians' and then finally absorbed into Chinese culture.¹³

This trajectory was rarely straightforward. More often, Chineseness was a continuum that shifted over time. A hunter in the frozen forests of eastern Siberia might find some opportunities to trade with Chinese settlers. His son might take up small-town life as a petty trader. His grandson might speak some variant of Chinese well and acquire more trappings of respectability. And his great-grandson might have the chance at some book-learning and become a low-level official, upholding Civilisation on the periphery. Or if the centre's hold were weakening, a family might descend in the opposite direction in as many generations.

What was happening at the edges of China was rather like what was happening within. Even among Chinese, only a minority could really appreciate the truths of Confucianism and the way of life embodying them. Just as with Sanskrit in India and the Greco-Roman learning of the ancient Mediterranean, classical Chinese culture was an elite pursuit. An educated gentleman had a duty

to civilise the uncivilised so far as their capacities would allow. Such was the literal meaning of *wénhuà* (文化), or ‘culture’: a process of being transformed by learning. Given enough time, a discerning barbarian might embrace these universal values and learn to live correctly. Some talented individuals from the lower classes within China might also rise through study. For those who did not rise, either within or beyond the empire, moral influence could still be salutary. In some eras, scholar-officials were expected to give moralising lectures to peasants in the countryside, much like sermons delivered by priests elsewhere in the world.¹⁴ In the same way, barbarians who did not convert could still see civilisation from afar and acknowledge which way was up. This kind of socialisation is sometimes called ‘enculturation’ if it happens within a society, and ‘acculturation’ if it involves people being influenced by another society. ‘Assimilation’ happens once the convert is fully accepted.¹⁵ The movement goes from ignorance to wisdom, according to people who feel they speak for the culture in question.

Most Chinese thinking about the frontier reflected experience on the northern and western steppes. But the south had its own frontier, in the tropics of today’s Guangdong down through Vietnam and Cambodia to Sumatra. Some of these areas were administered from the centre by Chinese officials, but with a large native population. Others were tributary states, and still others lay at the far edges of Chinese awareness. On the southern frontier, we see some of the most vivid Chinese colonial images of savagery. Officials sent southward usually saw their postings as a sort of exile amid heat and disease. They believed firmly in the superiority of Chinese civilisation and its eventual spread, but they found the periodic revolts of hill peoples an irritation. One historian of the Tang dynasty found that they held a rather unflattering reptilian image of southern barbarians, and ‘imagined their unpleasant neighbours as slithering about in the shadows on the edge of their enlightened land’.¹⁶

Accounts of southeast Asia in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries are just as disdainful. A commercial attaché with the Chinese ambassador to Cambodia called the Cambodians ‘coarse-featured and very dark’. Another traveller, Zhang Xie, described the Malaccans as dark-skinned and very simple fishermen. He worried a great deal about the prospect of being killed by crocodiles or tigers lurking in the forests. And, not least, he remarked on the ‘really wicked and depraved behaviour’ of the natives of Pahang, near Sumatra. Supposedly they spent much of their time making animal sacrifices and drinking blood.¹⁷

Descriptions like these raise the knotty question of how much barbarism was

seen as a matter of culture versus as a matter of race. On the one hand, the dominant strand of Chinese thinking about barbarism was culturalist. Barbarians could be transformed and assimilated, given enough exposure to proper customs and learning. In theory, even someone from a non-Chinese racial background could master the Confucian classics and be fully accepted as a scholar-official. We shall see later in the book that this civilising process often did happen in practice, too. On the other hand, in some centuries there were powerful undercurrents of racism, in which the Chinese felt not only a cultural chasm but also a ‘physical discontinuity’ with outsiders. Sometimes barbarians were described in animalistic terms, with the characters for their ethnic groups’ names including the radicals for dog, reptile, or insect.¹⁸

When China was strong and ruled by ethnically Chinese dynasties, its self-confidence usually meant openness and a willingness to assimilate outsiders. In contrast, the racial view of barbarism tended to emerge under pressure. When ethnically non-Chinese rulers such as the Yuan (Mongols) and Qing (Manchus) governed, some thinkers lashed out in racial terms against the idea that such interlopers could become fully Chinese. Shortly after the Yuan defeat by the ethnically Chinese Ming in the late 1300s, one writer named Fang Xiaoru argued that having someone of barbarian origin ruling China had been like having a dog on the throne. And when the Ming later gave way to the Qing, a Hunanese thinker, Wang Fuzhi, echoed the sentiment. He thought it was never acceptable to have a foreign dynasty governing China. Barbarians had a rustic and savage nature unlike settled Chinese, and the two should remain distinct. Since ‘[i]t is in accordance with the ordinances of Heaven and the dictates of human feeling that each should thus find delight only in his own ways’, it would be far better if ‘the two lands will ignore each other to the advantage of both’.¹⁹ Such tensions only came to the surface from time to time, but they were built into a cultural landscape in which way of life and physical features often overlapped.

The Roman empire was equally confident of its own central place in the world. When the empire was founded, its coins bore an image of the globe. While hazy on the details, Roman geography was quite ambitious, claiming to know something about the farthest ends of the inhabited world. The first emperors were often described as ‘world-conquering’, and the empire initially was supposed to expand to cover the entire globe. Only later, after a more realistic assessment of the distances involved and the practical difficulties of administering territory, did Rome cease expanding and focus instead on refining the techniques to govern what it already occupied.²⁰

The Roman frontier resembled the Chinese frontier. It moved outwards through a mix of trade, alliance-building, and conquest during the late republic and early empire. First it incorporated northern Italy, Gaul, and Spain. Getting drawn into disputes among barbarians and trying to ensure its own security, Rome then expanded into the wilder regions of Europe, in Scotland and along the Rhine and Danube. To the south, beyond the ruins of its defeated rival, Carthage, the empire faded off into the sands of the Sahara. To the east, it settled into a strategic equilibrium with the Persians around the Euphrates. Many of these edges emerged through trial and error, and through experience of the costs and benefits of expansion, rather than any grand plan of conquest. Emperor Trajan, who reigned from 98 to 117, was the most ambitious, a kindred spirit of the expansionist Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty. Trajan thrust into eastern Europe and Mesopotamia as far as the Persian Gulf, but such overextension was more than the empire could bear. On all the frontiers, fortifications and milestones dotted the periphery, cowing the local populace into submission with the visible power of Rome. The edges remained blurred, however, since a lot of trade and migration cut across the frontier zone.²¹

Rome's sharpest manmade boundary echoed the Great Wall of China, though on a smaller scale. Trajan's successor, Hadrian, took a more modest tack of trying to secure the frontier against barbarian raids, much as the Chinese had tried to keep out nomadic marauders. Across northern England, he built what is now known as Hadrian's Wall. Such a strategy of securing the empire's borders worked well enough for a couple of generations until the tide began to turn. The frontier started retreating slowly under Marcus Aurelius, and more noticeably by the third century AD. Eventually the barbarians overran the empire altogether in the 400s. Unlike in China, conquest did not merely replace one dynasty with another; it meant the permanent disintegration of this largest of unified European polities.

Just as China had an inside and an outside, so did the Roman empire have *Romanitas* and *barbaria*—as both place and way of life. Similarly, these categories were much more cultural than racial, as entrenched in first the Greek and then the Roman consciousness. Historians of the ancient Mediterranean have found that despite some restrictions on voting and intermarriage in the early city-states, the boundary between outsiders and insiders was more or less permeable. On an individual level, interactions could be charming and hospitable. Civilisation was not seen as overlapping with skin colour, for example. Artistic depictions of dark-skinned Africans—mainly Nubians and Ethiopians—show an

awareness of gradations of colour, and some aesthetic preference for lighter complexions, but broadly a humanising portrayal of specific individuals. Among those who were educated and upwardly mobile enough, race and ethnic origin made little difference.²²

That is not to say that there were no stereotypes of peoples at the periphery, of course. Those living around the Black Sea were supposed to be rustic and superstitious and reek of garlic. Scythian nomads from the Caucasus were believed to be brutal to their captives but freedom-loving and law-abiding among themselves. Phoenicians were seen as skilful but double-crossing. The more urban and sophisticated the culture, the less the condescending language of barbarism was used. The Persians, for instance, were seen as more serious competitors than the less sophisticated peoples of northern Africa or northern Europe.²³

The Roman image of barbarism that has come down to us most fully is of the northern frontier, which ran through Britain, Gaul, and Germany. The most vivid account is that of Tacitus, a Roman senator who wrote shortly after the conquest of Britain was completed in the 80s. Some of his description was framed as praise for the Roman governor, Agricola, who he thought exemplified the classic virtues. The rest detailed how Britons and Germans were being turned into Romans. The civilising mission worked from the top down, coopting tribal chiefs with luxury goods and the comforts of settled urban life. They would be easier to govern once softened up. At the same time, Tacitus had a grudging respect for the untutored valour of the northern European barbarians. Their turbulence and love of freedom made them hard to conquer.²⁴

As in China, the Roman frontier was a transition zone in which gradual changes added up over the generations. Imperial control extended to two circles of territory: that directly administered by the Roman bureaucracy, and farther out client states that were kept in the Roman orbit by loose cultural influences rather like the Chinese tributary system. Rome had no overarching policy on how to deal with barbarians and turn them into Romans. It had only a general cluster of elite attitudes that shaped how policy was adapted to local circumstances. Even the cultural markers were blurred now and then. Roman elites at the frontier often clung to language and other signs of sophistication, especially when they felt under pressure as outposts of civilisation. Most of the material trappings of *Romanitas*—jewelry, coins, household effects, even types of architecture—flowed across the Rhine and Danube through trade and then percolated down from the upper layers of barbarian society. Political organisation was also not

always as straightforwardly Roman as it might seem. On the frontier in the Middle East, the empire formally founded some city-states on the Mediterranean model. Many of the offices and the local constitution resembled those of Rome. More detailed records and excavations show that local tribal practices persisted under these names, with kinship-group elders making decisions together and each group living in its own settlement.²⁵

A loose patchwork of tactics aimed to bring reality as close to theory as possible. Rome used its army to suppress resistance in conquered territory. It rewarded cooperation by local notables and imparted a Roman education to their offspring. Serving on a city council or performing military service were routes to citizenship. The numbers of citizens steadily grew until the Edict of Caracalla in 212 granted citizenship to almost everyone residing within the empire. The face of subjugated lands also changed. Roman cities were built. Monumental architecture, including huge stone theatres, impressed the grandeur of Rome on people who walked past every day. As the empire's penetration of daily life advanced, Roman law became the standard for resolving disputes. Some local tribal arrangements for mediation lingered for a while, but only if they could be slotted into Roman law as the ultimate source of authority. All these tactics worked from the top down. Policy was most deliberate when it came to coopting local elites and getting them to identify with Roman civilisation. Rome got loyalty, and they got local power and prestige. The lower orders were mostly left to fend for themselves and acquire the trappings of *Romanitas* gradually if they were up to it.²⁶

Like all frontiers, the Roman was difficult to manage. In civilising the edges of empire, officials had plenty of opportunity to exercise the qualities of leadership that their education had instilled in them. The cultural superiority of Rome and the virtue of its aristocrats were intertwined at the fringes of civilisation. As an official, you could show your qualities by keeping the currents of cultural change going in the right direction, away from *barbaria* and towards *Romanitas*. Imperial expansion was an exercise in martial virtue and self-command. Of course, realities on the ground may have been rather less inspiring. The talk about conquest and peril in northern Europe was convenient for those urging more military expenditure, for example.²⁷ But this story was firmly part of the Roman imagination, just as China's magnetism for barbarians was in its own empire.

This sort of deliberate civilising mission backed by imperial power was impossible in India given its fragmentation. But in its own way, India did have

analogous second-order universalist ideas about civilisation, frontiers, and barbarism. Geographically, it was nearly as self-contained as China. The sea surrounded it on the southwest and southeast. In the north, the Himalayas and the Hindu Kush reduced routes for invasion to a few passes from the northwest. Whatever outside influences trickled in from time to time, these circumstances gave the carriers of Hindu high culture the same sense of centrality as their counterparts in Rome and China.²⁸ In the *Laws of Manu*, India's geography makes it a sacred space, suited to living properly and following the rituals. 'That land where the black antelope naturally roams, one must know to be fit for the performance of sacrifices; [the tract] different from that [is] the country of the *mlecchas* [barbarians].' Civilisation was to radiate outwards. 'From a Brahmana, born in that country, let all men on earth learn their several usages.' Only those lower down the scale of civilisation could naturally range outside such a heaven on earth. Thus a *sudra*, member of the lowest of the four strata, could move anywhere outside India to subsist if necessary.²⁹

If India was the centre of civilisation, who were its barbarians? As in China and Rome, barbarism was a gradient both within society and beyond it. The spread of Hindu orthodoxy southward, as some castes of Aryans conquered and migrated, left both the lower strata and pockets of hill tribes outside the scope of full 'civilisation'. The Hindu term for 'barbarian', *mleccha*, originally referred to the Dravidian peoples of the south soon after conquest. Their territory was not fully part of *aryavarta*, the sacred Hindu heartland of the north with its many shrines.³⁰

These barbarians were gradually incorporated over the generations as they embraced Sanskrit and adopted *dharma* to guide their conduct. The transition could take centuries, since caste hierarchy meant that individuals could rarely move upward on their own. Whole tribes or strata of society had to be resocialised. Assimilation to proper Hinduism was swifter in the case of some ruling families, who could often be winked at as they made up a fictitious genealogy to win acceptance over a couple of generations. Finally, the occasional interlopers from outside, such as the Greeks, Huns, or Chinese, would be called *mlecchas* by default, but if they fit the profile of a warrior caste (*ksatriyas*) could be classified as *vratyaksatriya*—*ksatriyas* by origin who had degenerated through failure to observe the proper rituals.³¹ All these adaptations, like the Song dynasty's grudging equal treatment of the Liao, were exceptions that proved the rule. To be something other than a barbarian you had to be civilised by the prevailing definition. Either you were in or you were out, and the

only way to get in was to fit the mould.

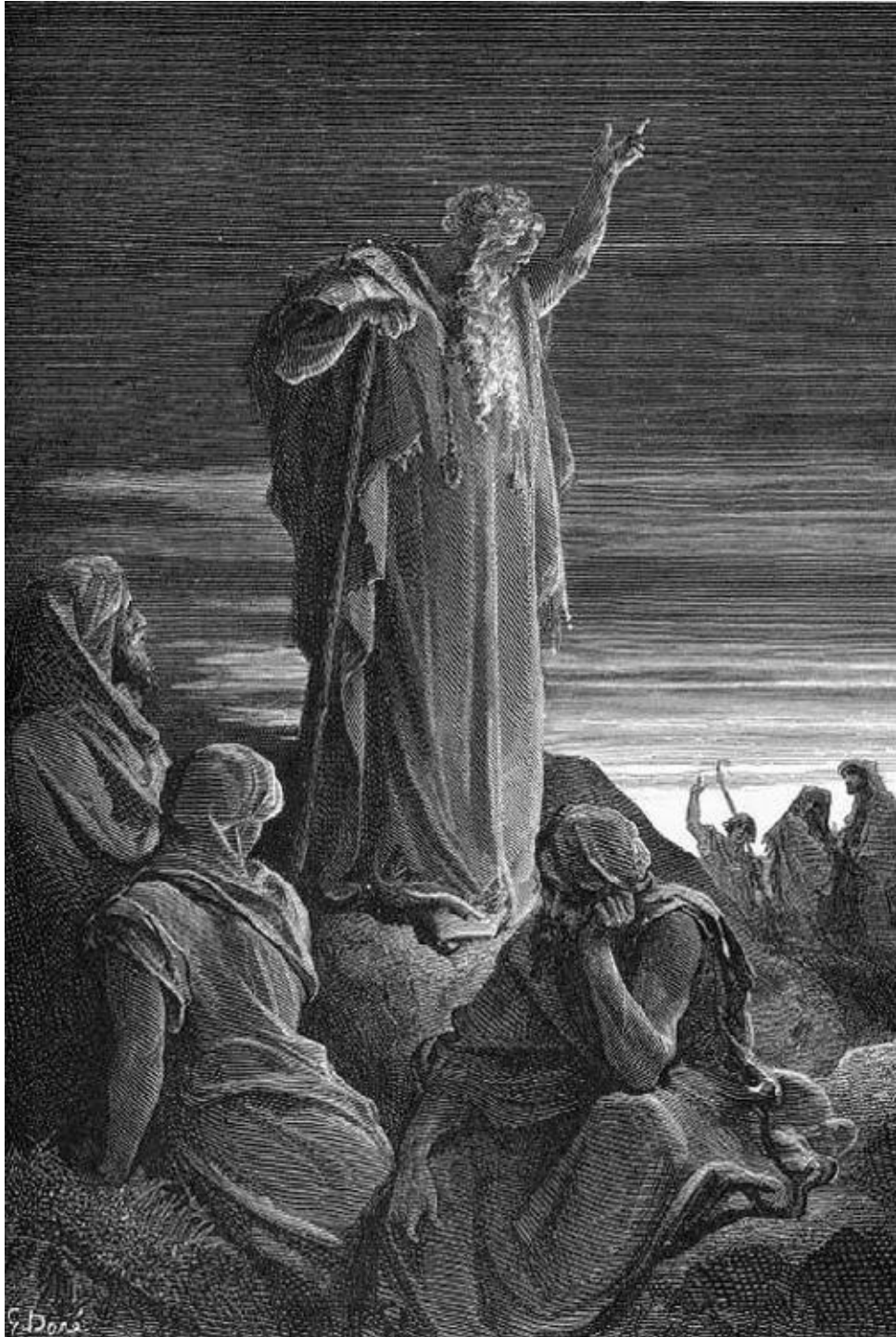
Much of the Indian frontier thus lay inside rather than at the edge of the subcontinent. The closest thing to an external frontier in Indian history lay to the southeast, beyond the sea. Most of what is called Indonesia and Malaysia today is predominantly Muslim, but for about a thousand years it was largely Hindu. Hindu cultural influence spread through southeast Asia from about the first century BC, following the routes of merchants, adventuring warriors, and brahmins doing missionary work. A Sanskritic high culture, literature, art, and legal codes were overlaid on top of the small indigenous communities. Colonisation happened in a haphazard way, largely through intermarriage between Hindu settlers and the higher layers of the host societies. The caste system operated more loosely in these offshoots of India than in the subcontinent itself. Once the numbers reached a critical mass, some small and medium-sized Hindu kingdoms emerged, to endure until the Muslim influence overcame them centuries later.³²

The Indian periphery was thus much more diffuse than in the Chinese and Roman examples. There was no political force behind it and no guiding project of conquest and conversion. From ancient Hindu political thought, some ideas lingered about a king capable of ruling the world, but no one was in a position to put them into practice. Indeed, the Hindu cultural universe took a rather low-key approach to matters of sovereignty. At the edges of the 'Hinduised' zone in southeast Asia, this civilisation came up against China pushing in from the other direction. In Siam, a peculiar compromise emerged. The Siamese monarchy had been much influenced by Hinduism, including the ideal of *chakravartin* or universal kingship. The political reality made anything so grand quite impossible, though the terminology persisted around the Siamese court because of its historical significance. This came into conflict with China's own conceits about universal empire, including the expectation that Siam would pay tribute to it. The compromise held that Chinese suzerainty could be acknowledged on a political plane, while Siam kept a Hindu-oriented universalism for spiritual purposes.³³

So far we have seen the cosmopolitan impulse arising in three ancient civilisations: the Greco-Roman Mediterranean, China, and India. Each disdained barbarians but could admit those of them who were willing to embrace universal truths. Truth itself crystallised in the virtues and customs of the core society and particularly of its educated classes. Beneath such self-confidence also lay a vague sense that even the most civilised way of life was a pale reflexion of truth

—an all-too-human effort to follow its demands—rather than truth as such. This gap between truth and its crystallisation in society did not come to full consciousness. Second-order universalism was more a long-term possibility than a real openness to individuals becoming ‘civilised’ in one go. This was because it was impossible to imagine anyone being fully a Roman, Confucian, or Hindu without practising an intricate cluster of customs and manners. They included everything from styles of speech and how you carried yourself, to use of sophisticated grammar, to appreciation of art, to awe of ritual boundaries, to the purity of your foodways. If you were a barbarian from some rustic corner of the frontier, even an appreciation of the civilisation’s teachings would not make you quite acceptable to its elites. You might hope only for your descendants to acquire all the trappings of civilisation through long exposure.

As history moved on, however, new visions of the world were to appear and disrupt this careful intertwining of thought, custom, and membership. Such disruption would allow a second-order universalism to unfold more fully. In the next chapter, we shall see how the energetic world religions swept aside many carefully maintained boundaries and expanded the horizons of civilisation to the ends of the earth.



The Prophet Ezekiel. Engraving by Gustave Doré, 1880.

4 The World Religions

The cosmopolitan impulse comes though in a rather different way in the monotheistic religions. If truth hinges on a personal relationship with God, then we find stark implications for how truth and society intersect. Truth is above society, not infused in it. And assimilation of outsiders will happen along quite different lines. In effect, religions of this sort throw into sharper relief the gap between a particular society's crystallised way of life and universal human truths.

We can see some of this adjustment of thinking in ancient Judaism. Early Jewish thought drew a clear divide between Jews and gentiles. Jews were a chosen people, defined by a covenant with God and their adherence to the commandments laid down through Moses. Among the rules binding on Jews was a prohibition against worshipping idols or other gods. What this meant for attitudes toward gentiles and gentile religions was a point of contention. One view held that the rules bound only Jews as a unique people. Gentiles could be left to worship other gods, though the God of the Jews was strongest. Another approach, which gained support over time, was to say that there were no other gods at all. Gentiles merely imagined them, because there was one God for all humanity. Everyone on the planet should eventually be converted to the one true faith, of which the Jews were safekeepers.¹

This more universalistic strand of Judaism is usually considered part of the Axial Age breakthrough, happening around the same time that thinkers in Greece, India, and China began focusing on human beings as such, rather than on just one people and one inherited set of customs. If so, then ancient Judaism lay on the threshold between what I have called first- and second-order universalisms. It held that its demands were true, not just local, but it was only beginning to consider the prospect of converting outsiders. The lack of a vast Jewish empire to match Rome and China may explain the more limited horizons.

The real breakthrough to religious universalism in the Mediterranean world

happened with the rise of Christianity. The story of Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection captured the imagination of growing numbers of believers. It also tapped into intellectual currents that converged in the eastern Mediterranean during the heyday of the Roman empire. Christianity was seen to fulfil the promise of the Old Testament and to replace a covenant with the Jews with a message for all human beings. At the same time, believers influenced by Greek thought could interpret Christ as a manifestation of the *logos*, the deep spiritual order of the cosmos.²

Whatever the level on which one could grasp the message, converts were many despite often intense persecution by the Roman authorities. Christianity offered a stark contrast of good and evil, a sense of moral urgency that the pagan cults and abstract philosophy lacked. Conversion started from below, among the poor and dispossessed. In continuity with the race-blindness of Roman civilisation, Christian churches were open to all in the first few centuries. The number of converts eventually reached a tipping point as more in the higher ranks of Roman society joined.³ Then the terrain shifted dramatically in 313, when Emperor Constantine announced in the Edict of Toleration that Christians would no longer face punishment. He also made known that he was himself a Christian. According to one story, he had seen a cross miraculously superimposed on the sun as he rode into battle a year earlier. Thereafter, empire and faith would be intertwined.

Constantine is remembered not only for his conversion but also for shifting the centre of gravity of the Roman empire eastward. In 330 he inaugurated a new capital at Constantinople, also known as Byzantium and later Istanbul. For a thousand years after the eventual collapse of the empire in western Europe, Constantinople would keep alive much of the legacy of Rome as capital of the Byzantine Empire. Christianity as the official faith of first the whole Roman empire and later its Byzantine rump would have a rather different flavour than in its persecuted early days. Much of the subversive and otherworldly tone was downplayed now that the educated upper classes had converted. More upscale Christians also tried to reconcile the new faith with their established traditions. Soon after Constantine's conversion, for example, a statesman and orator named Themistius tackled the problem. While a pagan himself, he wanted to find common ground between Christianity and Greek learning. His many eloquent speeches to the emperor stressed religious tolerance and the overlap of classical and Christian virtues. Philosophy, literature, and rhetoric could unite Christians and pagans within the elite. He thought they could all agree on the qualities of

mildness and magnanimity desirable in a ruler, as well as on maintaining peace and acting charitably toward barbarians.⁴

At the time, this synthesis probably seemed like a recipe for carrying on Rome's glory indefinitely. As the centuries wore on, however, it became obvious that the empire was in unavoidable decline. The western empire collapsed under the pressure of internal corruption and Germanic inroads from the north. Slavic peoples began pressing in on the north Byzantine frontier, while Muslim conquests from the east shank the empire further. These setbacks were a powerful challenge to the self-image that the Byzantine empire—the *Basileia Romaion*, as it called itself in Greek—had inherited from both Roman and Christian universalism. Now that the *Basileia* was clearly not the whole world, the Byzantine mind sensed cosmic disarray. Eventually the cosmopolitan impulse took a rather different tack, in which frontiers and control of territory counted for less. Borders could collapse inward under conquest, but they could also collapse outward if one remained confident of Christianity's eventual spread. Constantinople could still be the spiritual centre of the world, inspiring all human beings even if it could not govern them.⁵

Unlike Byzantium, western Europe did not have even the remnants of political unity. The western empire's final collapse in 476 marked the beginning of many centuries of fragmentation. Large-scale infrastructure collapsed, villages turned inward to subsist as best they could, and warlords fought each other over the heads of the suffering peasantry. Only the Catholic Church in Rome sustained a loose cultural unity across that end of the continent. *Romanitas* as a way of life among elites largely faded into oblivion, without power and prosperity to back it up. Fragments of Latin learning survived here and there only because of the tireless efforts of monks copying over aged texts by hand, often only for linguistic practice and liturgical use. Most of them could barely understand the intellectual substance of the books they were preserving. In one of history's ironies, this copying happened mostly on what had been the rustic fringes of the empire. Some of the best preservation work was done in the monasteries of Ireland, which had never even been under Roman jurisdiction.⁶

What of the barbarians? Without an empire in the west, a simple territorial frontier no longer made sense. Instead, the image of barbarism evolved to mean two things, which often overlapped. The barbarians could be ferocious warriors at the fringes of Christian Europe. Or, more typically, they could be the heathens who had not yet converted to Christianity. The overlap of the barbarian and the pagan had its humbling implications for the civilised. Even the most devout and

confident Christians knew that their own peoples had once been pagans too. They would often freely use the word ‘barbarism’ to describe the pre-Christian past of their own societies.⁷ In political and military practice, old wine went into new bottles. Where Roman officials had once controlled the frontier, new itinerant knights and warlords dressed up their own conquering ambitions with professions of piety. Their families intermarried with each other across long distances to form the kernel of a new European aristocracy. In the German and Slavic zones during the early Middle Ages, they drew on ideas of Christianisation by conquest. Pagans faced a choice in defeat. *Ritus aut natio deletur*: ‘Either the rite or the people is to be extinguished.’ The native rulers could convert, or new Christian rulers would replace them and create a new political space for the peasantry to be Christianised. Either way, Christendom would expand.⁸

The boundary between Christian and non-Christian hardened as the Middle Ages went on. In antiquity, the early churches’ lack of power meant they could hardly impose their will. Later, the Catholic clergy’s loose control of most of western Europe allowed them to define orthodoxy. One aspect of this tightening was the insistence that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, ‘there is no salvation outside the Church’.⁹ Second-order universalism could no longer be a grey area but was rather a matter of black and white. In the three ancient civilisations of Rome, India, and China, proximity to the centre was in many ways a matter of degree, of how well or poorly one acquired the trappings of cultivation. Instead, membership in mediæval Christendom was a stark either–or choice. The clergy would judge whether one had made the correct choice and continued to uphold it. Those who violated the rules could be excommunicated, cut off from the sacraments, the community, and ultimately even from God.

This view of what it meant to embrace truth grew more sophisticated in the late Middle Ages, especially as learning became more widespread again. One key challenge to Christian orthodoxy emerged when the writings of Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, lost to western Christendom after the fall of the empire, were rediscovered during the reconquest of Spain from the Muslims. Such philosophers were admired and obviously had much to say about truth and virtue. But as pre-Christian pagans, they could not be praised too much without undermining the Church’s claim to have all the answers. This problem was taken up in the 1200s by St Thomas Aquinas, one of the most learned theologians of the age. He settled on a solution akin to that of Themistius nine centuries earlier, though he was speaking from a Christian rather than a pagan

perspective. Aquinas argued that all truths were compatible. Philosophical reason could get intelligent people a long way towards living virtuously and knowing God existed. But only a leap of faith, an embrace of Christian revelation, could fill in all the gaps and secure the ultimate human happiness of reconciliation with God.¹⁰ This ‘Thomistic’ synthesis of faith and reason, of Christianity and the remnants of the old Greco-Roman high culture, defined Europe from the late Middle Ages up to the early modern period. It was the most richly integrated vision of civilisation that that part of the world has ever known.

Despite its political fragmentation, mediæval Europe also carried forward the Roman aspiration to a universal state. Perhaps the best expression of this ideal was Dante Alighieri’s treatise, *De Monarchia*, composed in the early 1300s. In much the same spirit as Aquinas, Dante merged Christian and Aristotelian themes. Human nature was the same across all cultures. The goal for all peoples should be to develop the mind, live virtuously, and secure justice. The unity of human nature logically mapped on to the unity of God and on to the political unity of a world empire. The Roman empire had been the best example so far, and had been designated by God as a suitable birthplace for Christ. Dante hoped for the revival of such a universal empire. Only a world-emperor, reigning jointly with the Pope as the secular arm of Christendom, would have satiated his ambition and have no need to expand further. Thus he would be well placed to guide his subjects to virtue, just as the clergy would guide them to salvation. Dante and his fellow travellers wrote long justifications of the need for empire, working through all the nuances of the Roman legacy and how a ruler could be legitimate. While conditions were unpromising, they pinned their hopes on one candidate for world ruler. This was the so-called Holy Roman Emperor, the quite weak overlord formally elected by some German princes—and in practice chosen from among the Habsburg dynasty—to reign over a loose conglomeration of territories in central Europe. Aspirations far exceeded reality for this ‘emperor and lord of the world’.¹¹

At the western end of Eurasia, we thus see the centre of gravity of ‘Civilisation’ shifting over the centuries. Universal ideas about human flourishing emerged in Greece and gained new reach with the Roman empire. Then they merged into the energetic monotheism of the Judæo-Christian tradition. The empire split into eastern and western branches, both of which collapsed in due course. In western Europe, Latin Christendom held sway for centuries as a loose cultural and spiritual unity, enriching itself yet again with the rediscovery and incorporation of classical high culture. As the Middle Ages

drew to a close, the region had a high level of intellectual sophistication, but was unable to restore the political project of world empire that lingered as a legacy of antiquity. Throughout these almost two millennia, we see recurring themes: the confidence of the carriers of civilisation that they are bearers of universal truths; much of the content of the virtues they respect; and the idea that barbarians can convert. A second-order universalism gradually had taken shape.

The post-Roman world was under pressure in part because Muslim conquerors surged out of Arabia after the 600s. The mix of arms and fervour was unprecedented. Indeed, Muḥammad has been ranked by some historians as the most influential man in history, because during his lifetime he held both religious and political authority over a wide area.¹² This early expansion of the Muslim world was more than just the founding of a new empire. Muḥammad's receipt of the Qur'ān happened in Arabia, but it was not meant only for Arabs. As Toynbee noted, the rustic spaces between decaying civilisations have often been the birthplaces of great world religions and new civilisations. When great historical projects collapse, new spiritual aspirations surge up.¹³ Arabia before Muḥammad was just such a rustic space, a philosophical as well as largely a geographical desert, with Zoroastrian Persia and Hindu India on one side and the Roman and Christian Mediterranean on the other. The new voice addressing humanity was a barbarian voice. It offered a stark monotheism much like Christianity, as well as a detailed blueprint for how to organise a just society.

Within a little over a hundred years after Muḥammad's death, the Muslim conquests had reached as far as Persia and central Asia in the east, the edges of the Byzantine empire in the north, and Morocco and Spain in the west. This expansion happened under the Umayyad dynasty, the last rulers of a unified Muslim world-empire. After their domains fell apart in 750, never again would a single state rule all Muslims. This split mirrored the earlier breakup of the western Roman empire, as well as the political fragmentation of India. In much the same way, the vague hopes of reunification lingered. As in Latin Christendom, only a loose religious and cultural unity held the Muslim world together from west Africa to southeast Asia. Local emirs professed their common piety as Muslims despite their competing ambitions. The single most important force for unity, however, was the '*ulamā*', the religious scholars or clergy. Their definition of Islamic civilisation swiftly settled on something quite similar, in form if not in detail, to what we have seen in other parts of the world. Rather than spreading all layers of Arab culture, they carried to these far-flung territories a certain upscale flavour of theology, legality, and refinement. They

took pains to emphasise the Islamic rather than Arab character of the civilisation they represented.¹⁴

Islamic civilisation rapidly became as capacious a cultural universe as any of the others discussed so far. It offered a rich field for travel and action. At about the same time that Dante was writing his treatise *De Monarchia* on the northern shores of the Mediterranean, one of history's great adventurers was setting out on the southern side. Ibn Baṭūṭa was born in Tangiers to a clerical family of Berber origin. In 1325, he embarked on the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca required of all Muslims able to afford it. Ibn Baṭūṭa's trip turned into something much longer, taking him over 120,000 kilometres and nearly a quarter of a century. He visited every Muslim-inhabited territory of his era, ranging from west Africa to eastern Europe to the Middle East to India to China to southeast Asia. Everywhere he moved comfortably in the higher layers of society among countless emirs and clerics. Given his own learning, he was even invited several times to serve as a *qāḍī*, or judge.¹⁵

Within this diverse and far-flung world, a learned Muslim such as Ibn Baṭūṭa was a learned Muslim, whatever his place of origin. Such unity turned Islam into 'the great intermediary civilisation of mediæval times', touching at its frontiers on all the other major cultures of the Old World. Its circuits of trade and migration stretched across the vast deserts and steppes of Eurasia.¹⁶ Its power of attraction to converts was immense during these centuries. Many undoubtedly embraced Islam out of personal conviction. Others, including merchants trading across vast distances, found plenty of incentives for 'social conversion', as one historian has dubbed it.¹⁷ Economic and political pressure gave Muslims an edge in doing business. Even beyond the economic webs binding the Muslim world together, the psychological appeal of belonging to this vast civilisation should not be underestimated. When it came down either to clinging to a locally insulated minority religion or to joining the widest horizons of the *ummah* of Muslim believers, most people could see which way the 'cultural gradient' sloped.¹⁸

We saw earlier that the frontier of the Roman empire gave way to something much looser in the case of mediæval Christendom. The frontiers of the unwieldy and spread-out Muslim world were looser still, and the need to make sense of other religions even more pressing. For one thing, Islam as articulated via Muḥammad came late on to the world stage. Outside Arabia, there were already a multitude of complex civilisations and established religions. The meteoric

expansion through conquest and trade also meant that Muslim-controlled territory often included significant religious minorities. Even more than mediæval Christianity, therefore, mediæval Islam had to have a lot to say about non-believers and their place in the Islamic universe.

A framework for answering this question already existed in how Muslims understood Islam itself. The revelation to Muḥammad was simply the last in a series of revelations, all of which had the same content. Prophets had been sent to all peoples on earth. Some had been ignored. Others had founded existing religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism. Those other religions were imperfect because their original revelations had been corrupted over time. Only the Qur'ān, recorded verbatim in Muḥammad's lifetime, was a reliable guide.¹⁹ This view of the world cut both ways. On the one hand, it meant that other religions had nothing to offer Muslims, who had the word of God in its entirety and unchanged. Many theologians argued in this vein that only Muslims were likely to be among the saved. As the Muslim world solidified in the Middle Ages, it showed a tendency toward a 'hardening communalism' as more Muslim thinkers took such an exclusive line.²⁰ Muḥammad was not just the last of a series of prophets saying the same thing. He was the last prophet in the sense of having the last word. On the other hand, other religions such as Christianity and Judaism—and, by analogy, Hinduism and Buddhism when encountered—sprang from the same source if one dug back far enough. This deeper common ground meant their followers, the so-called 'Peoples of the Book', should not really be persecuted as idolaters.

This was much the same attitude that let elites in the ancient civilisations see some barbarians as respectable, insofar as they resembled the civilised. But Muslims still had to deal with the practical matter of how to treat non-Muslim minorities under their rule. Over time, the *dhimma* or *millet* system took shape. *Dhimmis* were 'Peoples of the Book' who submitted to Muslim rulers in exchange for guarantees. This 'contract' between religious communities meant that *dhimmis* could observe their own faith, govern themselves on most internal issues, and be exempted from military service. They were still second-class citizens, however, and could only rise to prominence in some niches such as medicine or tax-collecting. Whether they were well treated in practice is a matter of debate. Some historians have found a long record of peaceful coexistence in which Christians and Jews could prosper, even holding high offices under the Ottoman empire. Others have argued that most of the time, *dhimmis* were hemmed in and subject to an endless train of petty humiliations and abuse.²¹

Which version one hears depends on where one asks the question, as well as whether a given writer aims to paint a favourable or a damning picture of mediæval Islam.

Because universal religions are open to converts but also distinguish clearly between believers and infidels, they all confront this problem of how to deal with religious minorities. Mediæval Christendom had to resolve it at the same time as did the Muslim world. By most accounts, Jews on the Christian side of the Mediterranean usually fared worse than those on the Muslim side. The Byzantine empire tolerated them with some mild discrimination, making use of them especially as intermediaries with the Muslim world as well as Latin Christendom.²² In Catholic Europe, Jews faced more persecution. In most countries, they were a tiny ‘alienated minority’ of less than 1 per cent of the population. Their weakness as well as the Church’s efforts to root out heresy meant they lost ground steadily over the centuries. Tensions between individuals of different faiths could often get blown up into clashes between whole communities. A shoving match in the street or an illicit affair could unleash ‘accusational violence’ of the sort that wracked France and Aragon in the late Middle Ages. By the 1500s, many European rulers had expelled the Jews from their domains altogether.²³

The treatment of Jews on opposite sides of the Mediterranean was partly due to their different numbers and to social pressures little connected with religion. But it also had its roots in the different Islamic and Christian rationales for religious tolerance. For Muslims, the Jews were just one more legacy of an earlier divine—albeit later corrupted and defective—revelation. They were like other Peoples of the Book, to be tolerated where necessary even if seen with ‘exasperated contempt’ because of their failure to convert. For Christians, the Jews were unique in both good and bad senses. They had been a chosen people, bearers of the religion of the Old Testament. They had to be kept around as living testimony of their breach of the covenant in rejecting Christ and allowing the Crucifixion. Where Muslim tolerance rested on the common roots of all faiths, Christian tolerance—limited solely to Jews—fitted into a tale of collective moral failing.²⁴

Across the sweep of mediæval experience, there was no easy way to deal with this awkward situation. It is the problem of the outsider who is an insider, so to speak. In the midst of a community of fervent believers, and on the territory they control, is a type of person who is equally fervent but about something radically different in content. Moreover, even the way of describing his or her beliefs can

seem an insult to the surrounding majority, because it claims that the majority is mistaken about the source of revelation or what it has said and to whom. Such exceptions to orthodoxy can be lodged into a second-class position, as *dhimmi* or as permanent witnesses to their own obtuseness. But they cannot ever be taken quite seriously, either as an integral part of the civilisation or as barbarians residing at a safe distance from it.

So far we have seen how this problem played out within spaces controlled by two monotheistic world religions, Christianity and Islam. What happened when the followers of a faith such as this had to fit into a niche within one of the older civilisations such as Rome, India, or China? In the case of the Roman empire, the Christians eventually won and remade it almost beyond recognition. Other cases show a more interesting pattern of what happened when followers of expanding world religions gained a foothold, but only a foothold, in a complex civilisation with a strong state. Could one have dual citizenship, so to speak, in both one's faith and one's host civilisation?

The entry of these faiths into a preexisting civilisation faced similar challenges in China, India, and pre-Christian Rome. None of the three civilisations defined itself around a unified religious orthodoxy. Confucian China paid a lot of attention to social ethics, but the imperial bureaucracy had little interest in promoting any particular style of worship or idea of the divine. Likewise, Hinduism had so many diverse sects and ritual practices that society was not tightly wound around any one orthodoxy.²⁵ All three civilisations hung together internally based on long experience of a common territory and some interlocking social norms. Moreover, they took a passive approach to barbarians, preferring to attract them rather than to seek them out for conversion. Any ambitious world religion coming into China, India, or pre-Christian Rome would come up against something quite unlike itself. It could not just argue for one version of metaphysics against another—the Resurrection versus the Qur'ān, for instance—and see who was persuaded. Instead, it had to find a way for religious faith and cultural belonging to intersect.

We might borrow one tool for making sense of this challenge from Lee H Yearley, a scholar of religion who some years ago offered a fascinating comparison of Mencius and Aquinas. He suggested that Mencius's Confucianism was a 'locative' religion. This meant that it saw human fulfilment in carrying out one's duties within a sacred social order. Aquinas's Christianity, by contrast, was an 'open' religion, in which salvation comes from transcending one's own culture for the sake of a personal relationship with God.²⁶ Of course,

Yearley's purpose in drawing this distinction was narrower than ours here. But it does loosely map on to what was at stake when a religion such as Christianity or Islam found its way into the setting of any of the three ancient civilisations.

An ancient civilisation such as China, India, or pre-Christian Rome saw itself more or less like a crystal. The light of a universal religion shining into it would play off its contours and reveal the beauty of its texture. A light shining from a slightly different direction would make other features stand out. Looked at that way, a universal religion would simply add a bit more spiritual illumination to a complex civilisation. It would not change the character of that civilisation so much as enrich the lives of some of its inhabitants. If different inhabitants chose different paths of spiritual illumination, so much the better for the brilliance of the crystal. It could benefit from all sources of light. The meeting of light and crystal was really about the crystal.

For a devout religious believer, however, that approach entirely missed the point. Instead, the different civilisations were like prisms. The same source of light passed through all of them. The character of each prism might affect how the light came out the other side: some would be too dark to let much through, some would refract some colours of light better than others, and so on. But onlookers would not mainly be interested in the prisms. They would see the light itself, after it got through the peculiarities of each prism, as the most beautiful and fascinating thing. In this view, the meeting of light and prism was really about the light.

Despite the similarities between India and both China and pre-Christian Rome, it may be less instructive to look at India to make sense of this issue. The subcontinent's political fragmentation and its long tradition of religious diversity meant, more or less, that anything could find a niche there without much vigorous pushing back from other interests. Christianity's conversion of Rome is also a poor illustration, because in that instance the civilisation yielded to the universal religion. Instead, let us take the Buddhists and Nestorian Christians in China, then the Manichaeans in both China and Rome (where, unlike the Christians, they did not win), and finally the Jews and Muslims in China.

Buddhism started in northern India around 500 BC and gradually spread over south Asia. It found its way into China during the Han empire, and flourished particularly during the Sui and Tang dynasties a few centuries later. Many of the early Chinese Buddhists were merchants doing long-distance trade, though some of their ideas and practices spread downward to ordinary people. Most of the time, Buddhism was quite welcome in China and seen as unthreatening to the

established order. This was largely because its missionaries and followers explained themselves using the language of Daoism, the native Chinese variant of mysticism. Buddhism and Daoism were two sides of the same coin, they claimed, and in practice Buddhist and Daoist themes often merged with each other. Buddhism in China was also politically innocuous. Its faithful had no powerful outside force behind them and left the imperial order unchallenged. Only a few Confucian scholars pushed back against them. One Tang dynasty writer, Han Yu, said Buddhists should not be allowed to 'mislead the masses'. The religion came from outside China, he protested. Buddhist language and customs were barbaric and at odds with the rites of Confucianism.²⁷

Such hostility to Buddhism was more the exception than the rule. The esoteric types of Buddhism practised by monks generally fared well and, for a time, linked China and India across the Himalayas, as in the seventh-century pilgrimage of Xuanzang.²⁸ This sort of religious cosmopolitanism had its potential and its limits. On the one hand, Buddhist monks everywhere were part of a cosmopolitan spiritual community. A foreigner like Xuanzang could be accepted by Indian monks as a colleague and preside over a debate among them. On the other hand, Buddhism fitted safely into a niche in the host society. It was only a source of esoteric wisdom and made no dangerous political or social demands. The monks fitted into the world as it was, whether on the northern or southern side of the Himalayas.

Christianity in China fared less well. The first Christians who arrived in the 600s, under the Tang dynasty, were Nestorians, a Syriac denomination that had flourished in Persia before the Muslim conquests. Unlike the Buddhists, Nestorian missionaries found it hard to win adherents in the mainstream of Chinese society. Christian theology, including such ideas as the incarnation of Christ, was hard to translate into acceptable language because of a lack of Chinese equivalents. Moreover, Christianity never grew indigenous roots. First it was dismissed as 'the Persian religion'. Then in 745, an imperial decree renamed it 'the Da Qin religion', in reference to its Roman origins.²⁹ Either way, it never got past the mental link to a distant territory, making it seem an exotic import rather than a universally relevant faith.

From the Buddhist and Christian examples, we can see that a faith was acceptable if it limited itself to a harmless esoteric niche, and if it could grow indigenous roots by using local language to make its claims more palatable. The more placeless a religion and the more uncompromising its view of the world, the more hostility it would provoke from this kind of society, and especially

from a jealous state. Take Manichaeism—at its start the most cross-cultural of the world religions, and today the only completely dead one. Manichaeism was founded in the third century in Babylonia, in the Persian-controlled Middle East, by the prophet Mani. He claimed to offer the original, undistorted common teachings of every earlier prophet from Jesus to Zoroaster to the Buddha. Mani travelled during his own lifetime as far as Persia and India, and his missionaries continued vigorously spreading the faith after he died. When they came up against religions such as Christianity and Buddhism, Manichaeans insisted that those rivals were all placebound, while Manichaeism alone was universal. Certainly the mix of cultural repertoires did lend the faith a cosmopolitan air. It also tended to appeal to people of an intellectual bent. Its theology divided the cosmos into forces of light and darkness, and suggested that salvation meant an escape from the burdens of the material world.³⁰

Wherever Manichaeism went, it faced resistance from the political authorities. It demanded total loyalty to the faith rather than to any secular establishment. The Roman empire was even more suspicious of it than of early Christianity. Christianity at least came from Judaea, which was securely within the empire, while Manichaeism seemed more dangerous because of its origins in Persia. The religion appeared in Roman propaganda as a poisonous snake slithering in from the barbarous east. While Roman Manichaeans downplayed Mani's Persian birthplace—their religion was supposed to be placeless, after all—the imperial authorities tried to discredit him with depictions wearing Persian garb.³¹

China reacted almost as harshly to Manichaeism. It came eastward with traders via the oasis settlements along the Silk Road. Manichaean missionaries at least had one advantage over Christianity: they could accept Daoist and Buddhist language and imagery as foreshadowings of Manichaeism. They did make some inroads, and a few pockets of Manichaeans survived in such places as Fujian for centuries. But on the whole, they were always a persecuted sect operating on difficult terrain. Some Chinese officials called them 'vegetarian demon-worshippers' and feared their ties to rebel movements. This resistance from the Chinese establishment was not a question of heresy. It was because Manichaeans were a self-contained and self-confident bunch with alien practices. Their networks stretching beyond the frontier were unnerving. Even the Tang dynasty, which generally was quite cosmopolitan, banned proselytising from 732 and limited tolerance to already existing Manichaean communities.³²

In any of these cases, minority religions were acceptable only when they played the game socially and politically. They could make universal claims and

cut across civilisations only if they fitted humbly into a niche within each of them. Offering some sort of esoteric wisdom, without comment on society, was one way to do so. Translating their own ideas into very familiar language might also work. Or they might show that their followers had thrown in their lot, materially and socially, with the host society. This third option of integration was more or less the strategy of Chinese Jews and Muslims during and after the Middle Ages.

The Chinese Jews were always few, having trickled in from the west as traders and occasional refugees. The largest cluster settled in the city of Kaifeng in eastern China, where they survived for several centuries. Historical records show that they embraced their host society's opportunities for upward mobility. Many Kaifeng Jews took the civil service examination and did well enough to gain office. A couple of them even reached the highest degree, *jìnshì* (进士). Generations of exposure to study of the Confucian classics meant China's Jews gradually assimilated. Synagogue inscriptions show a mix of Jewish and Confucian symbolism, and a lot of emphasis on such themes as civic duty and piety to ancestors that would be appealing in both traditions. The openness of China to this unthreatening minority meant, ironically, that Jewish identity weakened over the generations. High rates of intermarriage eventually made the Chinese Jews almost indistinguishable from their neighbours. The higher they rose and the more they were posted away from their homes, the more likely successful officials were to abandon their Jewish roots. By the 1800s, the Jewish community of Kaifeng had nearly vanished.³³

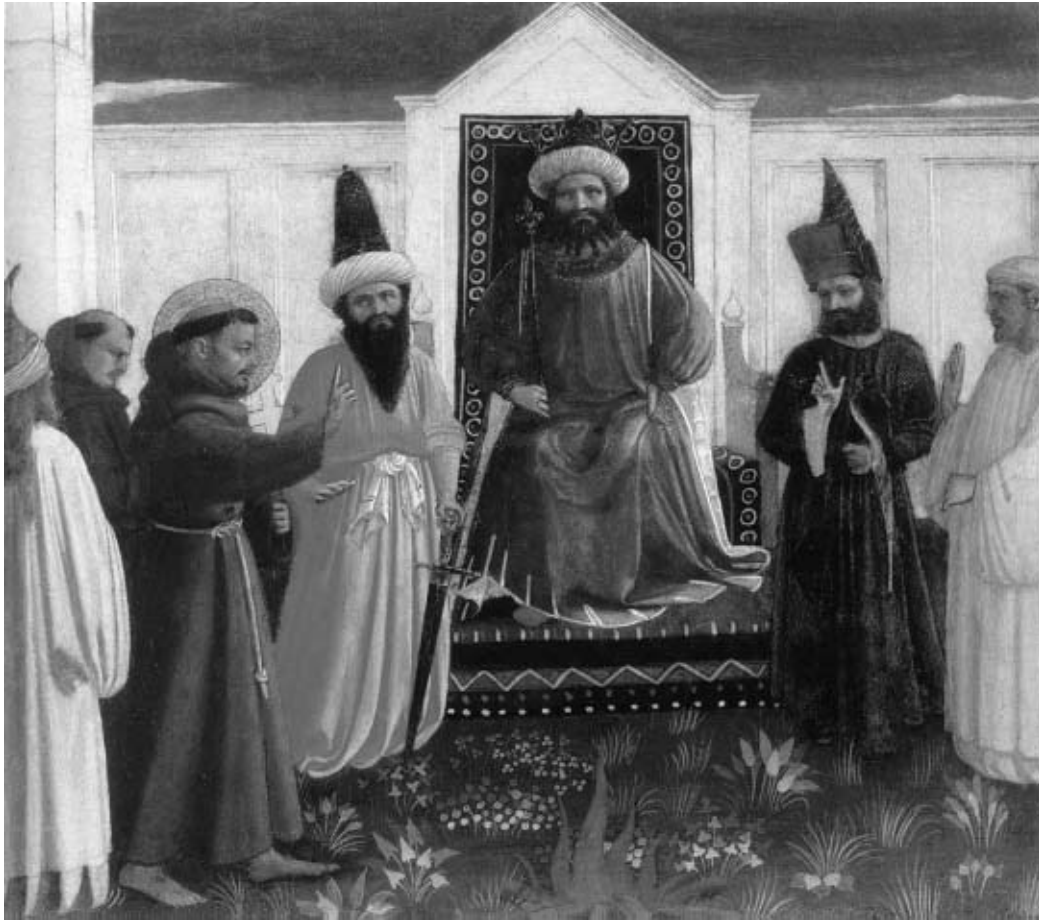
Many Muslims in the Chinese heartland followed a similar strategy, though with more uneven success. The first Muslims arrived as sojourners under the late Tang and early Song dynasties. Restrictions on their activities and contacts with the Chinese population hindered integration for a while. With the Mongol conquests of the 1200s and the founding of the Yuan dynasty, their fortunes improved. The Mongols employed many Muslims as mid-level administrators because of their familiarity with the multicultural scope of the Yuan empire. After the ethnically Chinese Ming came into power, the policy of incorporating Muslims continued. The Ming encouraged intermarriage with Chinese people, as well as the weakening of ties to their coreligionists abroad. Islam was never fully accepted as an indigenous Chinese religion as Buddhism was, but some Muslim communities in cities like Nanjing and Quanzhou found life tolerable when they accommodated themselves to the surrounding society. Wang Daiyu, a prominent Nanjing Muslim, published a booklet in 1642 laying out Islamic doctrine for a

Chinese audience. He used heavily neo-Confucian language to make the ideas recognisable.³⁴

Whether an encounter between a religious universalism and a universal civilisation works well or badly depends on how both sides approach it. From one side, if devout believers enter a society insisting on their doctrine's universal validity, determined to convert all humanity, unwilling to adapt their language to the local context, and more loyal to their cross-border coreligionists than to the empire under which they propose to operate, they will meet disaster. If they merge their own concepts with preexisting ones from the host civilisation, do obeisance to the local establishment, and profess only to have esoteric knowledge that might enlighten thoughtful people, they will be welcomed and might flourish for centuries. On the other side, the range of reactions by a host civilisation is narrower but more unpredictable. Much will hinge on whether the newcomers are considered barbaric or tainted by their continuing foreign ties. It may also matter what the host civilisation's standards for assimilation are: whether, for example, someone can 'look' civilised while still believing and practising whatever the minority faith is. Not least, it will depend on how paranoid the dominant classes are towards people who do not share all of their orthodoxies.

Still, in all these instances, we have not yet got beyond a second-order universalism. From the perspective of any of these civilisations—Confucian China, Hindu India, the Greco-Roman Mediterranean, Christendom, or Islam—it is a given that certain placeless truths exist and fit human nature as such. A gradient of civilisation and barbarism means that the domain of truth can expand to incorporate newcomers. These civilisations also have sophisticated ideas about how to transmit truth and how to judge when someone has passed from ignorance to enlightenment. There is still no independent and fully respectable 'outside', however. At the stage of a second-order universalism, such civilisations are still tolerating difference—if they tolerate it—because it is on the way to being assimilated, or because it is so humble and apologetic that it poses no threat. Each civilisation still has a supreme self-confidence. It defines the terrain on which human beings are talking to each other.

Another breakthrough has yet to come. Things get more interesting when civilisations lose control of that conversation. What happens when they encounter outsiders whom they cannot assimilate, convert, and control, but whom they have good reason to respect anyway?



St Francis of Assisi with thirteenth-century Sultan al-Kāmil. Painting by Benozzo Gozzoli, fifteenth century.

5 Mediæval Mirrors and the Virtuous Outsider

So far, we have seen cultured people in every corner of Eurasia thinking in remarkably parallel ways. After reaching a first-order universalism, the educated classes in each civilisation believed they were entrusted with placeless truths. Their own way of life supposedly approximated the ideal. Those outside their own civilisation or far from its habits were, by definition, barbarians. In a second-order universalism, the barbarians could draw nearer and thereby move up in the cosmic hierarchy. This view of the world remained very resilient so long as each civilisation had little contact with the outside, or contact only with those—such as occasional traders or subjugated religious minorities—who posed no real challenge to complacency.

The real challenge arises when you meet an outsider who is also unquestionably civilised. In the abstract, you might already have some grasp that your own way of life—the yardstick of Civilisation—is a crystallisation of truth, not truth itself. Even the deep virtues that you admire would not be exactly the same thing as the familiar habits that display them on the surface. If you meet someone who seems virtuous and sophisticated, but who does not fit your own civilisation's habits and beliefs, he or she will have to be explained. Perhaps virtuous ways of life can arise independently beyond your own frontier. Perhaps this civilised outsider just embodies the same truth in a visibly different way. Either way, you will have to drop the talk of barbarism. If you draw these conclusions, then you will have made a further breakthrough: you will have reached a third-order universalism.

This mental breakthrough is difficult and rare. Merely welcoming oddities from abroad, as a way to indulge the unfathomable diversity of the cosmos, will not be enough. You will break through to a third-order universalism only when you meet enough civilised outsiders on an ongoing basis, and on a more or less equal footing. Geography gives us some clue of where we might look.

Encounters happened most often where the great civilisations touched at their edges. Obvious examples are the Mediterranean and the Middle East, central Asia and northern India, and southeast Asia. Some areas such as Serindia—roughly from Kashmir up through Tibet to Turkestan—have had rich overlapping cultural influences at key moments of conquest and transition.¹ Over the long term, the Muslim world and south Asia have probably seen the most such intercivilisational contacts, simply because they sit in the middle of Eurasia with multiple neighbours. China and Europe, at opposite ends of the Old World, were a bit more insulated until the modern era.

Many encounters happened around the arc of the northern Indian Ocean, from Arabia along the Indian coast to southeast Asia. Trade picked up around the end of the Middle Ages. Many Arabic texts have survived with descriptions of the geography of southeast Asia. Since their authors were almost all long-distance merchants, however, the bulk of what they recorded was quite superficial. They noticed geographic features that would be helpful to navigators, as well as the local products for sale and the attire of the natives. Some also revealed something of their own pastimes and worries. One Arab merchant offered a guide to which local rulers in southeast Asia were known for taking a harsh view of crime. He carefully identified those who punished drinking and adultery, presumably so his readers could avoid such realms.² Such Arab traders later faced stiff competition from the Portuguese and Dutch, who burst into the seaborne trade in the 1500s. At first the newcomers were seen as just another band of merchants. Then impressions turned sour once the Europeans showed themselves tone-deaf about local customs. They often failed to give gifts as was customary and proved rather quick to resort to violence.³

Long-distance merchants were cosmopolitans of a rather unpromising sort. They showed little curiosity about different societies beyond ferreting out opportunities for moneymaking. Their relations with locals were superficial at best and conflict-ridden at worst. Mere presence does not mean serious engagement, especially when one behaves badly as well. Even many non-merchants showed little interest when they passed through in haste. Ibn Baṭūṭa, for example, was hardly a sensitive observer of non-Muslims in India and China. He wrote about some of the more striking Hindu sights, such as pilgrims who drowned themselves and slaves who cut their own throats as public entertainment. The hill tribes of India struck him simply as ‘rabble’. And even Ibn Baṭūṭa’s more courteous moments had an edge to them. On greeting one non-Muslim sultan, he said, tongue in cheek, “‘Peace [al-salām] be upon those

who follow the true religion.” They understood nothing but the word “al-salām”. The sultan then welcomed me.’ He also threw around the word ‘infidel’ quite freely in his accounts of both India and China.⁴

Brief encounters did little to narrow such psychological distance. In the early 1400s, an embassy from the Persian Timurid dynasty was despatched to China. Ḥāfiz-i Abrū, a Persian court historian, wrote mostly about the bizarre customs of his Chinese ‘infidel’ hosts, though he admired their handicrafts. When they reached the Ming court, the ambassadors were reminded of their lowly status in the world-under-Heaven. They had their audience at the same time as a group of prisoners being sentenced. They gave their gifts in tributary fashion as expected, but when asked to *koutou* they flatly refused to touch their foreheads all the way to the ground. To do so would have been blasphemous for a Muslim.⁵

Such fleeting encounters only reinforced prejudices and made both sides dig in in their complacency. The written descriptions left behind also tended to dwell on dazzling details of local customs and sights, rather like the tourist’s approach to a culture. Digging deeper into the social and political arrangements of the host society, and trying to make sense of any ethical common ground between host and guest, required longer exposure and serious conversation. Some visitors would be unlikely to delve so deeply even if they spent years in a place. Breaking out of one’s own worldview and developing some imaginative sympathy with very different people required a certain level of sophistication. One had to think critically both about oneself and about what one was seeing.

One zone of sustained intercivilisational encounter in the Middle Ages was the Mediterranean. The Muslim world’s conquests had brought it pressing up against the Byzantine empire in the east, facing Europe from the southern shores of the sea, and with a substantial foothold in the Iberian peninsula. Christendom at its weakest moment looked out at a forbidding world. At first the advancing Muslims had seemed like harbingers of the end times. After the 1100s, familiarity deepened and it became obvious that Islam was not going away. The more mediæval Christians knew of the Muslim world and what lay beyond it, the more painfully aware they were of Christendom’s marginality.⁶

The contrast between Christian and Muslim sides of this civilisational divide was not merely one of religious allegiance. Latin Christendom and the Muslim world were also radically different in social structure and style of life. Western Europe was largely rural, turned inward, and hierarchical. Feudal manors and monasteries dotted the landscape. Intellectual life, stagnant though it had become, drew mostly from humanistic Roman learning. The Muslim world was

more urban, more opulent, outward-looking, and linked by long-distance trading networks. Social relations among Muslims were on a more equal footing, bound by legal contract more than by status. Compared to the asceticism of mediæval Christianity, the Muslim world seemed more open to sensuality. Its intellectual heritage was much influenced by Greek science and philosophy.⁷

Across this divide, most encounters were hostile. In the early 800s, the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd wrote to the Byzantine emperor Nikephoros a letter that dropped all diplomatic niceties: ‘From Hārūn, Commander of the Faithful, to Nikephoros, dog of the Romans, greeting!’ Such people saw the religious chasm between Islam and Christianity as the world’s defining fault line. On one side was Dār al-Islām, the House of Islam. On the other was Dār al-Harb, the House of War. The former was meant to overrun the latter sooner or later. In that spirit, there were quite a few Muslim jingles about European infidels being destined for hell.⁸

For most of the Middle Ages, the Muslim world was much more prosperous and self-confident than Christendom. Unsurprisingly, Muslims tended to show much less curiosity about Europe than vice versa. Most of their geographical knowledge came secondhand from old Greek sources. More updated compilations made clear that Europe was a backwater. Despite little racial consciousness among Muslims, a few writers noted the ‘blanched or leprous colouring of the northern races’. Even the great historian and herald of social science, Ibn Khaldūn, wrote little about Europe. Compared to the Muslim world, Europe had little novelty or diversity of people. Its history and literature were pre-Islamic and placebound, hence of little interest to the universally minded. Given a ‘Muslim horror of venturing among infidels’, trade and embassies to Latin Europe, and the learning of European languages, were left to *dhimmis*, the Christian and Jewish minorities who had more rapport with the other side.⁹

Not all was quite so dark, though. Muslims found common ground more easily with the Byzantine empire than with Latin Christendom. They could appreciate the complexity and sophistication of Constantinople. Ibn Baṭūṭa wrote of his meeting with a former Byzantine emperor who had retreated to a monastery. He respected the man for his obvious piety, and he had quite a warm conversation with him about the holy places that both of them had visited, even though he refused to bow to the cross when invited to enter a Byzantine church.¹⁰ Countless Arabs and Byzantines crossed each others’ frontiers, pursuing peaceful diplomatic, commercial, and scientific exchanges. Muslims could extend warrants of protection to Christian visitors, just as Byzantines

could treat Muslims hospitably based on natural law. While the idea of an ongoing existential war always lurked in the background, the two sides could respect each other as similarly advanced urban cultures. Indeed, one point on which Muslims and Byzantines agreed wholeheartedly was that the western Europeans, the so-called Franks, were contemptible rustics.¹¹

The most sustained meeting ground between Islam and Christendom was not in the east, however, but in the far west. The only long-term mixed society, where both sides had experience of winning and losing, was in Spain.¹² First the conquerors of the Umayyad dynasty swept into Iberia and overran nearly the whole peninsula in an astounding seven years, from 711 to 718. A few Christian principalities survived in the far north and gradually gained strength to push back. The Reconquest was one of the most sustained projects of history, taking over seven centuries before the last Muslim state was expelled to Morocco. During these centuries of alternating wars and truces, on both sides of the shifting frontier significant numbers of Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived side by side in what has been dubbed the *convivencia*, or coexistence. It was one of the more notable cosmopolitan experiments of the mediæval world.

During the period of Muslim strength, central and southern Spain was known as al-Andalus. It was a prosperous and diverse society. The Umayyads administered the peninsula quite effectively up to the tenth century. At the apex of society sat the aristocracy of Arab ancestry, descendants of those who had led the conquest. Below them, the ethnic Berbers from North Africa formed the core of the army. Africans and Slavs made up most of the pagan slaves who sooner or later converted to Islam to gain status. The majority of Muslims were probably converts from the Spanish stock that predated the arrival of Islam. The entire population could speak Old Spanish as a lingua franca, and the educated classes could also read and write Arabic. By about 850, educated Muslims and educated Christians largely shared a common culture, though they were prudent to avoid debating religious issues directly with one another.¹³

Christians remained a large minority, and in a few areas even a majority of the populace. Most of the time they were tolerated with only mild discrimination such as some barriers against rising to high office. In daily life, perhaps the best monument to peaceful coexistence was the public baths. Elaborately built facilities, they had cold, tepid, and hot rooms, and were frequented by Christians and Jews alongside Muslims.¹⁴ Tolerance waxed and waned, of course. When the Berber Almohad dynasty took over the peninsula, they took a much harder line against non-Muslims. Tensions could break out of control now and then. In

Granada in 1066, an anti-Jewish poem whipped up mobs that led to four thousand Jews perishing in a riot.¹⁵

As the Christian Reconquest advanced southward, the same challenges of managing religious diversity cropped up on the other side of the frontier. From roughly the thirteenth to the fourteenth centuries, newly Christian-ruled zones maintained much of the same cosmopolitan approach as their predecessors. Both Muslims and Jews were recognised as having a permanent place in a diverse society. The Muslim minorities, the *mudéjars*, were directly protected by the rulers of Castile and Aragon and segregated into their own quarters. Muslims and Jews competed with each other for relative status under Christian sovereignty. Both minorities would appropriate Christian language to make a case for why they were closer to Christianity than their rivals. More often than not, the Muslims would win because they could acknowledge the importance of Jesus and Mary.¹⁶

Christian tolerance faded over time, particularly as the fifteenth century wore on and the Muslim toehold in the south shrank. The Spanish kingdoms began pursuing a more typical European policy of promoting religious homogeneity for the sake of national unity. Public baths were segregated, with edicts specifying the days when each group could use the facilities. In Valencia after its fall, group boundaries became lines of tension when the state established Muslim houses of prostitution for Christian men as a source of tax revenue. And as the trauma of the Black Death caused chaos, mob violence broke out against the remaining Muslims. Finally, in 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella expelled all Muslims and Jews from the peninsula.¹⁷

We saw earlier why, within each civilisation on its own, accommodation of religious minorities was always a delicate matter. They were tolerable only in a tiny niche that did not disrupt the dominant civilisation's sense of its own centrality and infinite attractiveness. In a setting such as mediæval Spain, with its shifting frontier and groups living side by side, the challenge to complacency was magnified. For Christians, even the Jews were problematic as a leftover of the pre-Christian world. Muslims, whose revelation had come later, were harder to accept given their image as aggressive heretics, particularly when Christendom seemed to be retreating in front of them. For Muslims, however, ruling Christians in al-Andalus was like ruling them anywhere else. The problem came when Christians started to rule them, because the domain of Dār al-Islām was only supposed to expand, not contract. This novelty became a point of dispute among Muslim theologians. Many of the more orthodox ones urged

Muslims to emigrate from Christian territory rather than living in permanent subjugation. Just as *dhimmi*s within Muslim-majority societies were to be tolerated but gradually pressed to convert, so too did Muslims realise that they would not survive uncontaminated for long in infidel lands.¹⁸

Of course, we can find a range of attitudes on both sides. For everyone espousing tolerance, someone else urged the harshest of persecution. A recurring theme, however, was that the two faiths could never have true equality. They could hope at best for a *modus vivendi*, in which tolerance and goodwill depended on careful policing of boundaries.¹⁹ One could never quite escape the relentless competition between civilisations. Individual conversions were a case in point. One of the best known converts was Anselm Turmeda, a Majorcan priest in the late fourteenth century. He switched from Christianity to Islam, and instantly became a contentious symbol for both sides. Any such conversion was seen by the receiving faith as a way to enhance its own legitimacy and to celebrate a blow to the original faith that was abandoned. The Muslims' image of Turmeda was of a priest who had come to his senses and embraced the true religion. Some Christians later answered it by saying that Turmeda had merely been held captive in Tunis, clinging to his Christian faith, or even that he had converted but later recanted, thus dying as a Christian martyr.²⁰

The most promising cases of genuine mutual respect, significantly, did not involve anyone thinking in the abstract about a contest between civilisations, or trying to read individual choices as an instance of collective victory or defeat. Instead, this sort of respect came through recognising personal qualities. Muslim characters often cropped up in mediæval German literature. In the abstract, they were representatives of a hostile civilisation. In the concrete, with all the vividness of good narrative, they often came across quite well. The most admired Muslim would be a warrior who proved himself a worthy foe by the standards of Christian chivalry. His personal valour would stand in contrast to the unjust cause for which he happened to be fighting.²¹ Much the same deeply personal respect also crossed the frontier in Spain. The 'frontier romances' showed that Christian and Muslim warriors could find plenty of common ground in their virtues, despite everything else that divided them. This was not the abstract war between civilisations that might be trumpeted by a ruler or a theologian with an agenda. Nor was it a tepid respect for human beings of all types everywhere. It was an earned respect between people who upheld parallel standards of honour.

These encounters were taking place on land at the western end of the Muslim

world. As the Reconquest entered its final phase in the 1400s, they naturally began tapering off. At the same time, a Muslim at the opposite end of Eurasia was about to embark on a very different kind of encounter by sea. His name was Zheng He, and quite unlike a warrior on horseback, he was a eunuch administrator in Ming China. His father had been one of the upwardly mobile Muslim officials under the Mongol Yuan dynasty. When the Ming took over and made short shrift of their enemies, Zheng He was castrated as a child. Ironically, he entered a distinguished lifetime of service to the same dynasty that had wronged him.

Zheng He's tomb is near Nanjing and the Yangzi River that flows through China's heartland and out into the Pacific. Nanjing in the 1400s had the most impressive shipyards on the planet. Huge wooden vessels at least sixty metres long were vaster than anything set afloat until modern times. In 1405, Zheng He embarked from Nanjing as captain of the 'Star Raft' fleet of some 250 ships and 28,000 men. The third Ming emperor, Yongle, had ordered him to explore the Indian Ocean. The voyage had several purposes, including promoting trade, spreading the prestige of the new dynasty, and renewing diplomatic contacts. Over the next quarter of a century, Zheng He led seven expeditions ranging through southeast Asia, along the coasts of India and Arabia, and halfway down east Africa. They stopped after the Ming emperor decided they were a waste of money compared to securing the land frontier, in what one historian has dubbed a Chinese 'triumph of introversion'.²²

These were state-organised and generously funded voyages of exploration, quite unlike the Arab, Bengali, and Portuguese merchants who ventured haphazardly along the Indian Ocean trade routes. Zheng He was well situated to undertake such expeditions. He had good interpreters, mostly Muslims with long-distance ties, and his own grandfather had undertaken the *hajj* to Mecca years earlier. While further trade was to be encouraged, the primary aim of the voyages was to radiate imperial glory. People such as the simple fishermen on the African coast would do obeisance to China. One commemorative pillar erected by Zheng He in 1431 at Changle, in Fujian, declares such a worldview.

The countries beyond the horizon and at the ends of the earth have all become subjects.... Thus the barbarians from beyond the seas, though their countries are truly distant ... have come to audience bearing precious objects and presents.... [We] go and confer presents on them in order to make manifest the transforming power of the [imperial] virtue and to treat distant

people with kindness.

Whether these new tributaries understood the ritual submission demanded of them is rather in doubt. In any case, the mindset of such distant barbarians hardly mattered to Zheng He's fleet. The furthest he went to taking them seriously was giving out some educational texts, such as model biographies, to disseminate Confucian ethics. He took back to China an African giraffe, which was supposedly auspicious since it resembled the *qilin*, a mythical unicorn-like creature.²³

These encounters did nothing to disrupt the Chinese elite's sense of their own centrality. Zheng He's approach to distant lands was a backhanded tolerance. On the one hand, many historians have noted that the Chinese did not pillage or aggressively proselytise. They had no desire to overrun territory even in Africa, where they would have faced only weak and disorganised resistance. On the other hand, they proved willing to use force to strike fear on occasion, as when a couple of local rulers in south and southeast Asia proved insufficiently respectful of the fleet. More generally, they showed little respect or curiosity toward most of the more unfamiliar peoples they met. African coastal villagers were described dismissively in one report as like 'seagulls', part of the ocean scenery. The most genuine interest in non-Chinese cultures came from the crew's Muslim contingent—to some extent from Zheng He himself, but mostly from his companions. Zheng He also erected at Sri Lanka a tablet, written in Chinese, Tamil, and Persian, to honour a local buddha who supposedly had protected the fleet as it passed.²⁴ Some religious common ground must have moved him.

One of the Muslim crew members, Ma Huan, was taken along for his Arabic skills and wrote a detailed account of what he saw. His faith was already a bridge to the world beyond China and a reason for curiosity about some of the countries to be visited. Ma Huan paid his respects to Ming imperial pretensions in an ode declaring that 'to heaven's ends and earth's extremes each one is the sovereign's man'. But he also took very seriously his visit to Arabia. In adaptations of Confucian language, he called Muḥammad a 'holy man' and 'sage'. Most strikingly given the Confucian image of a world-under-Heaven, Ma Huan also referred to Mecca as 'Heavenly Square' (天方 *Tiānfāng*). Arab Muslims lived virtuously because they abided by the strict rules of Islam. Such enthusiasm did not go over well with some of Ma Huan's compatriots, however. Apparently the first published edition of his travel diary was edited by a Confucian scholar to cut out the section on Mecca, since he felt it improper to

paint too rosy a picture of lands outside China.²⁵

As China looked outward in the 1400s, it was quite confident of its own superiority. As confident, too, were the Muslim world and India. Unbeknownst to any of those civilisations, however, the global landscape was about to change drastically because of new ambitions surging forth from the other end of Eurasia. Once the process had run its course, they would never again be the centre of the world.



Alexander the Great. Alexander Mosaic, c.100 BC.

6 Strutting on the Stage of Empires

We have seen the confidence with which Zheng He's fleet sailed westward in the 1400s. In one of history's great twists, however, the balance of power in the world was about to shift in unexpected ways. Within a century, some unfamiliar and unsavoury people would start appearing more often in East Asia. After Spaniards occupied part of the Philippines, one Chinese writer, Zhang Xie, complained that they had come in by 'fraud and violence'. The interlopers had 'a grim look, dishevelled hair, aquiline nose, and a foul odour.... They were drunkards and quite arrogant.' In Japan a bit later, Iberians appeared in paintings in their peculiar costumes. They were put under the loose heading of 'southern barbarians' (南蛮 *nanban*), because the Japanese inferred at first that they must be some variety of Indians. One historian noted the odd symmetry that while the Japanese assumed the Europeans were Indians, the Europeans were about to meet Amerindians and assume they were Asians.¹ Mental categories are hard to crack.

Over three or four generations between the time of Zheng He and the time of the Europeans' arrival in East Asia, the world's landscape had changed dramatically. Christopher Columbus's 'discovery' of the Americas was the great watershed between mediæval and early modern periods. According to European logic, the vast American landmass was not even supposed to exist. The ancient Greeks had imagined missing continents, but had expected them to be in the southern hemisphere to balance the lands familiar to them. Exploration beyond the known world of Eurasia had been quite rare. Some evidence suggests that one Greek voyage got all the way around Africa in ancient times. Scandinavian fisherman also probed the coasts of Greenland and Nova Scotia in the late Middle Ages, though with little luck at settlement. Sustained exploration and European colonies had to await advances in navigation and sail design. The Portuguese led the way in the 1400s, inching their way down the coast of West Africa in search of gold, and eventually setting out eastward across the Indian

Ocean. Columbus himself gained some sailing experience on Portuguese ships in the 1480s. The Spaniards had also tried their luck beyond Europe on a small scale. In the same century, they had conquered the Canary Islands off Africa, evangelising the aboriginal inhabitants and setting up sugar plantations.²

These experiments paved the way for the conquest of the Americas. The Portuguese navigational and map-making breakthroughs brought a new global consciousness of space within reach of Europeans for the first time. Spain's own recent experience also uniquely suited her for imperial expansion. One historian has observed that Spain in 1492 was a peculiar case of a society deeply committed to its past but also able to adapt to new challenges. Its culture was infused with fervent Catholicism, chivalrous ideals, and a crusading zeal. In the same year as Columbus's voyage, the last Muslim enclaves in the south had been defeated. Spaniards had ample experience of conquering Muslim territory and devising new institutions to administer it. The Catholic clergy was determined to root out paganism and heresy, but also flexible in how it absorbed non-Christian cultural influences. As the Reconquest drew to a close, the feudal hierarchies that had faded in much of Europe were unusually strong in Spain. The new landed aristocracy sat confidently on its rewards for earlier military victories.³

Out of this environment came the men who would conquer the Americas. The most prominent and colourful of them was Hernán Cortés, born in 1485 to a poor gentry family in Extremadura, a parched and sparsely peopled region of western Spain. Cortés studied for two years at the University of Salamanca in his teens, acquiring a fair grasp of law, Latin, Roman history, and the mediæval romances.⁴ Abandoning his plans for a law career, he found few opportunities for making his fortune in the Spain of his time. The haughty aristocracy had gathered most advantages to itself, and avenues for upward mobility as a warrior had dried up with the Muslim defeat. Cortés also ran into difficulty with his predilection for affairs with married women. His imagination piqued by tales of glory and gold in the Americas, he sailed for the New World in 1504 at the age of nineteen. He would spend most of the rest of his life there.

After some years as a comfortable colonial administrator in Cuba, Cortés was itching to move onward and upward. The conquistadores were always trying to outmanoeuvre one another's authority and territorial fiefdoms. In that spirit, in 1520 he violated limited orders to explore along the Mexican coast, deciding instead to march inland and conquer the Aztec empire. This meant casting off the jurisdiction of Caribbean officials and claiming allegiance only to the king in Madrid.

Along with the Inca empire, the Aztec empire was one of the two political and economic powerhouses of the Americas. A complex and stratified civilisation, it was obviously in a different league from the small settlements that Spain encountered in the Caribbean. Cortés relayed his first impressions of Aztec society in a letter in October 1520. He was struck by the causeways and aqueducts of the Mexican capital, Tenochtitlán, which with its population of over 200,000 was larger than Paris. His best mental toolkit for dealing with a complex pagan civilisation came out of the long Spanish experience of waging war against Muslims. Throughout his letter, Cortés used the word *mezquita*, or mosque, to refer to Aztec temples.⁵

The Spanish approach to exploration was quite different from that of Zheng He's fleet 100 years before. Where the Chinese had treated the Africans with peaceful condescension, Cortés's men in Mexico were hellbent on pillaging and conquest. The experience through the eyes of the conquered appears vividly in the Florentine Codex, an encyclopaedic history composed between 1547 and 1579 and based on the recollections of native Nahuatl speakers. Book XII of the Codex mostly describes the Spaniards' advance from the coast to Tenochtitlán. The last Aztec emperor, Moctezuma, reacted with increasing depression and paralysis to news of their arrival and progress. Supposedly he feared that these strange outsiders were godlike figures foreshadowed in Aztec mythology. He dared not fight them directly, instead trying to appease them with lavish gifts of food, sending sorcerers to cast spells on them, and trying to divert them on roads bypassing the capital. His fears turned out to be justified. Cortés was to imprison the emperor soon after meeting him. The conquistadores searched high and low for gold. The carnage they committed comes down to us as one of history's great bloodlettings. In one such episode, thousands of Mexicans attended a festival in a square. While they danced, the Spaniards closed off the exits. They then rode in on horseback and spent three hours hacking the trapped natives to death.⁶

The Spanish conquest of the Americas offered a peculiar blend of such aggression and an obsession with legal niceties. For a time, the norm was to precede such bloodletting with a ritualistic reading of the *Requerimiento*—loosely, 'Requirement' or 'Requisition'. This document had been drawn up by lawyers in Spain as an ultimatum for native chieftains in the Americas. It laid out the Christian version of world history, starting with the Creation and ending with Jesus's grant of authority to the Popes. Then it explained that a recent Pope had granted the Spanish monarchs dominion over the Americas, to guarantee their evangelisation. The Amerindians hearing this background were then given

an ultimatum. Either they could acknowledge Spanish sovereignty and let missionaries preach to them, in which case they would be allowed to keep their lives and property, or they could resist and be crushed into submission. In theory, they were meant to get an hour to think it over. In practice, there are many accounts of the accompanying priests simply mumbling the *Requerimiento* to the trees while the slaughter raged. Many territories claimed for Spain were simply annexed on paper by being named, and thus assimilated to the universe of Spanish law. The metaphysics of legal authority counted more than facts on the ground. Such habits became a sore point with rival colonists such as the English, who protested that ownership could come only from sustained settlement—though, for some reason, previous settlement by the indigenous population did not count.⁷

We should not overstate the weight of such legalese, since much of the time the *Requerimiento* was just an excuse for men determined to fight their way into largely defenceless territory. But the mentality of those drafting it was rooted in the worldview of mediæval Christendom. The spiritual centre of this universal civilisation, the Pope, was the ultimate source of legitimacy for such a project of conquest and conversion. Any ambition to expand a monarch's domain had to tie into such a Christian framework. While carried out in a rather perverse way, the ultimatum to the natives implied that they were barbarians but also moral subjects who had to choose whether they were inside or outside. With religion as the marker of civilisation, it seemed only logical to demand conversion from those who had submitted.

The same rules applied in the eastern hemisphere, too. An Italian knight accompanying the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan recounted how, in 1521, a local ruler in Cebu, the Philippines, converted to Christianity. When the new Christian balked at burning his pagan idols, Magellan refused to bend and eventually forced him to do so. And around 1600, a Spanish lawyer wrote a description of the native customs of Luzon, a bit to the north. He took a fairly neutral tone until he got to religion, where 'they proceeded more barbarously and with greater blindness than in all the rest'. He felt that the devil must have appeared to the natives as savage animals and made them tremble with fear, or prompted them to make idols and futilely to worship the sun, the moon, and crocodiles.⁸

The Spanish attitude towards Amerindians was strangely ambivalent in those early years of the Conquest. On the one hand, they were being read legalistic justifications for their subjugation, and were being pushed to adopt Christianity.

Such measures implied that at least some Spaniards were taking them seriously as fellow human beings. On the other hand, much about the Americas was alien. Europeans knew a fair amount about Muslims, and a bit less about Africans, Indians, and Chinese, so exposure to these other cultures became a reference point for dealing with the New World. But the novelty of America made it tempting to fall into wildly fanciful images of the Amerindians. From the ancient Greeks up to the Renaissance, European writers had filled in gaps in their geographical knowledge by inventing ‘monstrous races’ in distant lands. Often they were rather credulous, taking grains of truth and exaggerating them almost beyond recognition. The pygmies became inhumanly tiny. The Tutsi were taller than average and thus became a species of giants. Another people who wore oddly shaped armour were described as being headless, with their faces in the middle of their chests. Mediæval Christians often debated whether such distant people were fully human and thus evangelisable. If not, then they might be leftovers from a divine curse, wretches descended from Cain or Ham in Biblical lore.⁹

Many of the early conquistadores were sceptical about such ideas and took a more commonsense view of Amerindians as having the same human nature despite some peculiar customs. Others let their imaginations run away. Some of the simple communities of the Caribbean, without private property, inspired imagery of the ‘noble savage’. Rumours of cannibalism spread for a while and struck terror into Spanish hearts. Such images of barbarism sometimes aligned with the self-interest of those holding them, as with a 1503 law that allowed enslaving cannibals. Other enterprising adventurers took a few Amerindians back to Spain for circus-like display.¹⁰ As the first large-scale encounter of different races, this seemed to be a moment in which the Christian–infidel divide of the Middle Ages was giving way to a harder racism. Sweeping statements about the wickedness of Amerindians as a race often came from officials and clerics in Spain who had never even been to the Americas but who still needed to defend tough policies.

The lack of clarity over Amerindians’ place in the Christian moral universe came to a head in 1550. In the summer of that year, the king convoked a debate in Valladolid to settle the matter once and for all. He posed two questions for the judges to consider. One was whether the Amerindians had the moral nature necessary for them to receive Christianity. The other was whether the Conquest had been legitimate, especially as a means to evangelisation. One session of the panel took place that summer, with the speakers alternating days and sending

written responses back and forth. A second session in the spring of 1551 was to sum up. The fourteen judges were split in their deliberations and never issued a verdict. But the debate itself has come down to us as a snapshot of radically opposed views at the time.¹¹

Of course, no Amerindians were going to speak in their own defence at this hearing. It was purely an internal debate among Spanish scholars, and might well seem dry and relentlessly impersonal in its logic. But as one historian of this episode noted, it would be hard to imagine such a debate happening in many other times and places. An empire was momentarily halting its conquests to reflect on the justice of them. It bespoke the seriousness with which much of the Spanish intellectual elite took Christianity and the legal tradition of the theory of the just war.¹² On both sides, the arguments deployed tried to draw on a rich heritage of ideas and apply it to the knotty moral dilemmas that key actors were facing on the ground in the Americas.

On one side of this debate stood the royal historian, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda. He had spent many years in Italy before coming back to Spain, and he was exceptionally well versed in Aristotle and able to write elegant Latin. He had never visited the Americas and may never have had any personal contact with a live Amerindian, except perhaps catching a glimpse of one or two around the royal court. Sepúlveda's argument hinged on Aristotle's theory of 'natural slaves', people who lacked the intellectual and moral faculties for full citizenship. He applied this concept en masse to the people of the Americas, calling them *homunculi* (little men) and suggesting a stark contrast between their nature and the virtues of Spaniards. They were so unreceptive to Christianity, he claimed, that they would convert only if forcibly subjected. And even then they would still need masters, in the form of the quasi-feudal *encomienda* system that bound them as serfs on large estates.

Giving the response to Sepúlveda fell to the cleric Bartolomé de Las Casas. The same age as Cortés, Las Casas had gone to the Americas at roughly the same time. After several years as a fairly typical colonial official with his own slaves, he had a change of heart and devoted the rest of his life to defending the Amerindians. He spent half a century in the Americas, including many years as Bishop of Chiapas in southern Mexico. He made great efforts to convert the locals to Christianity, but unlike many other priests he insisted that they understand the doctrines properly before baptism. He also managed to rub many exploitative landowners the wrong way by holding them to strict ethical standards and denying the unrepentant ones absolution during confession. His

magnum opus, the *Historia de las Indias*, took thirty years of research and writing. By the time he returned to Spain for the last time shortly before the Valladolid debate, he was well into his sixties.

In making his case to the judges, Las Casas stressed the global scope of the Christian community. Since believers could be found everywhere, membership could not be a matter of territory. Rather, it meant a personal relationship between God and the individual, marked in baptism. The Church was ‘nothing more than the whole Christian people, strengthened in faith and united in the society and communion of the sacraments’. Then he turned more directly to Sepúlveda’s arguments. The Spaniards had claimed a right of conquest over the Americas because the inhabitants were barbarians. But who was truly barbaric? Las Casas offered a rather positive depiction of Amerindians as having communal property and many of the same simple virtues that Tacitus had admired in the Germanic tribes a millennium and a half earlier. Moreover, if one judged only on the propensity to violence, then the Spanish conquistadores would probably be the only ‘wild men’ around. Thus he inverted the image of civilisation and barbarism that Sepúlveda took for granted.¹³

Las Casas acknowledged that there had been some cases of idol worship or human sacrifice. But in keeping with the logic of natural law, he insisted that all human beings have an inborn need to worship. Even if the Amerindians’ understanding of God were warped, they were still sincere in their faith and should be respected as such. By other yardsticks, many Amerindians such as those in Mexico would count as highly civilised. They had laws, craftsmanship, and elegant written languages. If they were barbarians, then they were no more so than the Spaniards’ own ancestors, whom the Romans had once called barbarians as well. No people anywhere were wholly unfit to govern themselves or to receive Christianity peacefully by their own choice. God’s plan for evangelisation required that everyone be open to the true faith and able to grasp it. The Aristotelian ‘natural slave’ category included only occasional ‘freaks of nature’, not a whole culture.¹⁴

Finally, Las Casas argued that even if the Amerindians were indeed barbarians, it did not give Spaniards a right to conquer them. The Aristotelian principle that the wise should rule the foolish, just as the mind rules over the body, only held among people already living together in one society. No such community of Amerindians and Spaniards existed before the Conquest. Only voluntary baptism could create one, and then the Amerindians should enjoy the status of fellow Christians anyway.¹⁵

Las Casas has obviously come down in history much better than Sepúlveda. He has often been read as a proto-liberal committed to equality and tolerance. But we should be careful not to reduce the kind of tolerance he espoused to some forerunner of liberal cosmopolitanism. One more nuanced interpretation of Las Casas has come from the Bulgarian-French philosopher Tzvetan Todorov. Todorov acknowledges the practical benefits of Las Casas's defence of the Amerindians, but he also calls it a subjugating form of love, 'the prejudice of equality'. He says Las Casas saw the people of the Americas as equal only insofar as they were potential Christians. His mindset left no room for them to be respected and at the same time remain obstinately different. In Todorov's view, Las Casas foreshadowed the modern Western impulse to assimilate the whole world. The real alternative, he argues, would be a postmodern acceptance of the other side's freedom to choose to remain different.¹⁶

I bring up Todorov's critique of Las Casas not because I want to argue for or against it. In unearthing the lost promise of cosmopolitanism, it will not help much to say that the problem with Las Casas was that he was too strong a universalist. Rather, Todorov's critique is useful because it asks unusually hard questions about the nature of Las Casas's tolerance. In one little-noted passage in Las Casas's writings, he defended the Amerindians because they were innocuous compared to the Muslims. Muslims were 'the truly barbaric scum of the nations', he declared. Due to their 'wicked malice' and the 'insolence of their minds', they had sinned greatly by refusing to embrace Christianity despite long proselytising and familiarity with its message.¹⁷

We begin to get a more complex picture of Las Casas than as just a spokesman of tolerance. To be sure, he took very seriously Christendom's openness to all human beings, making him a fine second-order universalist. He also showed a generous sympathy with Amerindian styles of worship, on the basis that while non-Christian they still reflected natural law and a sincere reaching out to God. This hints at a third-order universalism that respected pagans as they were, not only as they might become. But there is still a whiff of condescension in which, at least before converting, the natives are treated as innocents rather than as full equals. A little of Zheng He may lurk within Las Casas's benevolence. Full equals, people with their own resilient civilisation that would not yield easily, were like the Muslims against whom Las Casas lashed out in the same breath.

How encounters between civilisations will be understood depends, therefore, on the character of the civilisations involved. Sepúlveda's harsh view of the

Amerindians probably does say more about him than about them. With someone such as Las Casas, tolerance is knottier than it might seem at first glance. An encounter between Christendom and the Americas was simply not going to involve the same obstacles, or the same opportunities, as an encounter between Christendom and the Muslim world or India or China.

To understand why this was so, we have to go back a generation from the Valladolid debate. In 1524, very shortly after the Spanish conquest of Mexico, another, much more informal, debate had taken place. This debate was in Mexico, between twelve Spanish friars and some Nahuatl-speaking indigenous leaders. The text of the discussions, recorded forty years later by eyewitnesses, comes as close as we are likely to get to a serious dialogue between the two sides at the time of the Conquest.¹⁸ The setting had its limitations, of course. The Spaniards had already secured political control of Mexico and had the upper hand. The Nahua sounded a bit subservient at times. In the first part of the debate, the community leaders also had to point out that some of the religious questions could better be addressed by their priests, whom they then brought with them for the second round. These disadvantages aside, however, we can get a sense of the way the Europeans and the Mexicans chose to argue and what it might say about the flavour of each civilisation.

The Spanish friars relied on the same arguments in this setting as elsewhere. The Church had universal authority on earth as the delegate of God. The friars stressed that they had no superhuman qualities themselves and no worldly interests. They were just mortal men trying to spread the truth to other mortals. Christianity alone could save all human beings. Because it was true, it trumped everything else in the world. If the Amerindians' own gods were real, then logically they would be known beyond Mexico and the friars themselves would acknowledge their power. Since they were not real, the idols had to go. The Nahua responded with two main arguments. First, they had already been beaten into submission politically. At least they could be left with their own religious customs as consolation. Second, they had revered their gods since time immemorial. The weight of custom pressed on them, and it would be too much to have to accept now that they were not real after all.

Todorov sees this debate as yet another example of the Western wont to assimilate everything that is different. He suggests that the Spaniards could wear down the Mexicans in part because they were just more relentless. Moctezuma, apparently, had taken a more accommodating tack in offering to add the Christian God within the Aztec pantheon so people did not have to choose.

Todorov also notes that while the Mexicans fell back on arguments from tradition, the Spaniards were more adept at improvising reasons and gaining leverage from their perspective as outsiders. Another postmodernist historian has called the Spanish tactics a case of ‘epistemic violence’. It was not enough just to make the other side submit. The conquered also had to be forced to understand the true doctrine, and heresy had to be rooted out.¹⁹

Obviously the Spaniards did have a knack for argument. Clerics so versed in the many layers of theology and legal reasoning would be a formidable match for anyone. They had had much more practice with this kind of debate, even leaving aside the psychological advantage of being recent conquerors. They also had ample experience of encountering other civilisations, whereas there is no real evidence that the Aztec and Inca empires had any contact even with each other. But the asymmetry in this Spanish–Nahua dialogue also seems to reflect something deeper in the nature of each civilisation.

Here we come back to the trajectory of cosmopolitanism that I have been tracing. We have already seen that mediæval Christendom had reached at least the stage of a second-order universalism, in which its own truths were available to all humanity. People such as Las Casas and the friars took that intellectual framework for granted. They thought it self-evident that the Christian God should matter to people in Tenochtitlán just as much as in Toledo. The Nahua responded on a very different wavelength. What they found most worth defending in their own religion was the seasonal knowledge of their priests, the particular rituals they practised, and above all the sheer antiquity of their attachment to the faith.

That style of argument suggests that the breakthrough even to a first-order universalism had not yet occurred in the Americas. There had been no Axial Age there, so to speak, probably for the simple reason that their civilisations had not lasted long enough. The distinction between a way of life valuable because it was theirs, versus a way of life valuable because it reflected higher truths, was either absent or not articulated clearly enough to come up in the debate. Without this first breakthrough, Nahua leaders had little room to challenge the friars’ claims rigorously. Had they had their own second-order universalism, they might have had the confidence to go on the offensive and argue that Nahua religion was true for the friars as well. It might have been an intellectual stalemate, even if not a political one.

Such asymmetry had important implications. It meant the Mexicans could not defend themselves effectively in debate. It also shaped how the Catholic clergy

engaged them. Even the most openminded Spaniards, such as Las Casas, took them seriously only insofar as they had the potential to join his own civilisation. He said that they were sincere in worshipping their idols, and thus could not be dismissed as barbarians, but he did not probe into their religious doctrines in search of points of contact. He barely came within shouting distance of a third-order universalism, which would have respected the Amerindians as independently—even if imperfectly—virtuous on an ongoing basis.

Moreover, this asymmetry was not just a matter of how Spaniards chose to argue in one conquered territory. We find it in many other instances in world history. Even the ancient interactions between Greeks and Egyptians had some of the same tone. Many Greek travellers were intensely curious about Egypt as ‘the epitome of everything primordial and original in terms of culture’. The land of the pyramids was seen as having tremendous spiritual wisdom to offer. Curiosity ran mostly one way, though. Historical accounts abound of Egyptian resistance to Greek inquisitiveness, including the claim that Egyptian religious texts were in a sacred language unsuited to translation.²⁰ Some things just were not meant to be universal.

Lest one imagine the universalist impulse is peculiarly European, it is worth remembering that the same asymmetry cropped up even when Europe was not one of the parties. The Chinese voyagers in the 1400s were much more inclined to engage Muslims and Hindus and to translate their ideas back into Confucian language than to do the same with the animists along the African coast. And Muslim theologians could be just as relentless as the Catholics in how they advanced their own worldview. They did just that along the frontiers of their own civilisation and in criticising the Peoples of the Book. Perhaps that is why Las Casas saw them as serious rivals rather than easy converts. The asymmetry is not, in the end, between unique cultures. It is between all those cultures that have already undergone the breakthroughs to first-, second-, or even third-order universalisms, and all those that have not yet done so.

The real meaning of the European encounter with the Americas has many layers, therefore. It surely caused immense suffering among Amerindians. Disease, war, and later exploitation had wiped out as much as nine-tenths of the Amerindian population by the 1700s. The Conquest forever arrested the development of two civilisations, in Mexico and the Andes, that could have broken through to their own forms of universalism and become a permanent part of the global conversation. And the power of first Spain and then other European countries over the subjugated territories of the New World brought out some of

the worst human qualities among many who ventured there to seek gold and glory. At the same time, however, we can see this encounter as an opportunity for late mediæval Christendom to put its own universal call to humanity to the test. To incorporate these strange outsiders, it had to stretch its sense of human fellowship much further than ever before. In the more imaginative and sympathetic moments, there were glimpses of a truly human project in the making. Europe was flirting with the idea of becoming something more than it already was.

One of the more interesting attempts at a breakthrough to something grander came, ironically, from one of the less principled and more manipulative of figures: Cortés himself. He spent many years in the Americas, including the entire period from 1504 to 1528, from age nineteen to forty-three, and returned to Spain for the last time only in 1540. His rise to distinction in Mexico and the sheer length of time he stayed there made him throw in his lot with the New World. His centre of interest moved from his homeland to this new project of empire-building. After witnessing firsthand the annihilation of most of the Caribbean natives, for example, he hoped to preserve the Mexicans and find them a permanent place in the empire.²¹

What Cortés imagined for that empire went beyond anything that the court in Spain would have come up with on its own. His vision came through in long letters written in the 1520s to Charles V, the grandest of Habsburg rulers. The latter, some fifteen years younger than Cortés, was in his twenties when he read these despatches from the other side of the Atlantic. He occupied an enviable position in Europe. Because of strategic marriages among his ancestors, Charles V was simultaneously the king of Spain, southern Italy, Austria, Burgundy, and the Netherlands—about half of Christian Europe—and the elective Holy Roman Emperor. His dominions were the closest Europe had come since the Roman empire to unification under one ruler. Farther afield, his new overseas possessions included most of the Americas in the west and the Philippines in the east.

Cortés's vision for something even grander emerged from his successful incorporation of the Aztec empire. His account of the march on Tenochtitlán mentioned that the Mexican vassals of Moctezuma saw the latter as the lord of the world. Some switched allegiance to Charles V when they saw an opportunity to break free of their Aztec ruler. Cortés took this germ of an idea and extended it, with some likely poetic licence in how he relayed his personal conversations with Moctezuma. Supposedly Moctezuma told him that his own ancestors had

come from abroad long ago and that he had always known he would have to yield power to a foreign overlord greater than himself. Cortés then wrote of a speech in which Moctezuma formally renounced his throne to Charles V. According to this logic, the Habsburg emperor had a freestanding right to the Mexican throne, quite apart from any right of conquest that the Catholic Church might have recognised. One of Cortés's later letters remarked on the presence of both Spaniards and Amerindians on Mexican territory, with everyone as a vassal of Charles V.²² This began to look like an intercivilisational empire in the making.

In his biggest leap of imagination, Cortés wrote in 1526 that the empire could expand still further. He reported that some Spanish ships had just arrived on the western side of Mexico, having crossed the Pacific from the Philippines. He proposed to Charles V that he be allowed to command a huge fleet to sail to the coast of Asia. Not only could Spain compete with the Portuguese for trading access there but, drawing on the momentum from Mexico, Cortés could also claim Asia, pacify it, and settle Spaniards there alongside the natives.²³ The Habsburg dynasty would break loose from its roots in Europe and span all continents as a true world empire.

One historian has suggested that Cortés did not really mean what he proposed. To be sure, he knew enough of the currents of Spanish legal thought to be able to pull together a persuasive enough case for world empire. But the motive had less to do with a vision of the Habsburgs as world monarchs than with his own ambitions and his precarious position in the colonial administration. Among other things, he wanted to treat New Spain as a distinct branch of the empire, to prevent other Spanish conquistadores from carving off their own domains within it.²⁴ Adding a swath of Asia to his already impressive conquest in Mexico might have got him a few more titles of nobility, too. In any case, Cortés's proposal fell flat when received by Charles V and the court. Despite its far-flung acquisitions, Spain remained preoccupied with rivalries in Europe. No expedition was launched against Asia, and the idea of legitimacy coming directly from Moctezuma's lineage faded into history. Still, some traces persisted of the idea of a globe-spanning empire. By 1551, some letters show the phrase 'monarch of the universe' being used to describe Charles V.²⁵ And the old motto for Spain, *ne plus ultra*—'nothing beyond', due to its place at the western extremity of Eurasia—gave way to simply *plus ultra*, 'more beyond'.

Cortés was one of history's most ambitious men, to be sure. His fantasies of cosmopolitan empire may seem ahead of his time. But ironically, two of the

most important efforts at cosmopolitan empire-building long preceded him. The first was that of another young and megalomaniacal conqueror nearly two millennia earlier, even before the Roman and Han empires. Alexander the Great was born the son of Macedonia's king after his country had already become a dominant power in Greece with the weakening of city-states such as Athens. He was educated, along with a few other teenagers of elite families, by none other than Aristotle. Succeeding to the throne on his father's death in 336 BC, at the tender age of twenty, Alexander took command of Macedonia's army. A few military successes against Persia, including the defeat of emperor Darius III, planted in his mind the seed of a campaign for more far-reaching conquests. He then embarked on a ten-year rampage through most of the known world, taking him as far as northwestern India and down the Indus River before he had to turn back. He died at Babylon at thirty-two years old, a victim of either typhoid or poisoning, depending on which account one believes.

Alexander comes down in history as a wildly ambitious, bad-tempered, and hard-drinking sort of fellow. The grandeur of his aspirations is clear from his speeches. When his troops were reluctant to advance further into India, he declared that the expedition's pursuit of 'immortal glory' was a worthy goal in itself. He wanted to reach the eastern sea that supposedly ringed the earth, thus surpassing all earlier travellers and mythical conquerors. '[W]heresoever I shall be fighting I shall imagine myself on the world's theatre, with all mankind for spectators.' When suspended above the perilous swirling water of a river, he reportedly exclaimed, 'O Athenians! Can you believe what dangers I undergo to earn your applause?' On reaching the mouth of the Indus, 'like a victor who had triumphantly driven his chariot round the goal, he fixed the frontiers of his empire'.²⁶

Alexander's empire, reaching from Greece through Persia to India, unravelled swiftly after his untimely death. But what might it have become otherwise? What was the vision driving it? Certainly he wanted to be more than a Greek ruler. He made gestures toward the Persian part of his dominions, marrying two Persian noblewomen and claiming to have succeeded to the throne of the defeated Darius III. He also adopted a more Persian-style imperial image for himself than his Greek soldiers found congenial, even leaning towards deification in his last years. Some historians have suggested that such Persian dalliances may have been practical rather than inspired. He needed new sources of legitimacy for his imperial army, and found Persian political culture a better fit for his ambitions than Greek democracy.²⁷ The hope of world empire may

also be overstated. One gets the impression from much of Alexander's actions and demeanour that he was more interested in making a name for himself by passing through vast territories than getting down to the hard work of governing them.

Still, Alexander's adventures contained a deeper promise. There were real impulses to a culture-bridging universalism. In strange ways, his imagination probably went further than Cortés's two millennia later, and certainly it went further than the solid Roman and Han empires that came so soon after him. One fascinating hint at a cosmopolitan project comes from a letter preserved by Jewish scholars. Allegedly the letter was written to Alexander by Aristotle, his former tutor, during the campaign of conquest. Many historians doubt its authenticity. If not genuine, it was forged not long afterwards and drew heavily on ideas that Alexander himself was pulling together. Aristotle's supposed letter welcomed the prospect of a world state as a final cessation of war and an opportunity to build a utopia. People would redirect their energies from fighting to self-cultivation. In keeping with the older Greek disdain for barbarians, however, Aristotle counselled against the kind of intermarriage between Greeks and Persians that Alexander himself was encouraging.²⁸ Aristotle was not the only intellectual influence on Alexander, though. The Stoic idea of a human unity across cultures was also important. Where the Stoics talked only of unity among the wise, the philosophers, Alexander fleshed out their vision politically. A universal empire would be far more concrete and would be quicker than education as a way to broaden people's horizons.²⁹

But how feasible was this merging of Greek, Persian, and possibly Indian cultures? Had Alexander lived and had a long dynasty followed him, would such a project have come to fruition? I suspect that some deeper obstacles lurked beneath the surface, having to do less with Alexander or any heir who might have succeeded him than with the nature of the civilisations that would be merged. The Alexandrian project, to the extent it was sincere rather than just a fevered conceit, was also premature. The cultures he wanted to bridge had powerful impulses to universalism and could accept outsiders. Yet for them to engage one another seriously, still other preconditions had to emerge. They needed many more centuries to evolve further along their separate tracks. They first would have to learn to think about their own truths in a more sophisticated way before they could talk about truths shared in common. Alexander foreshadowed something, to be sure. But his main contribution may have been merely to pave the way for more encounters later on.

Like his conquests, such paving ran westward and eastward. While the empire was shortlived, it permanently enlarged the horizons of Greek thinking. Greek settlements, partly a product of the Alexandrian campaigns, dotted southwest Asia as far as northern India. This diaspora formed the basis of so-called Hellenistic culture, a meeting-ground in which the Greek language formed a lingua franca among peoples as diverse as Romans, Jews, Persians, and Celts. While Greeks in the east kept a strong sense of their roots, they also took an interest in other cultures. Jewish and Zoroastrian religious ideas circulated freely. Even the art and architecture of the Greek diaspora blended in fascinating ways with local tradition. The usual white marble columns abounded, for example, but accompanied by rustically styled black and red stones to lend an air of 'Asianisation'. The brief experience of empire also fed into larger-scale political thinking in the Mediterranean world. The aspiration to a vast universal state with one ruler was realised for a time with the consolidation of the Pax Romana.³⁰

From an Indian perspective, Alexander's conquests made little impression at first. He double-crossed a few rulers with whom he had signed truces, and he even hanged some brahmins who had fomented resistance. Yet one Indian historian has noted that despite all the sound and fury, almost no Indian records survive of Alexander's passing through. Hellenistic kingdoms survived for a while in Bactria, in the far northwest, though they were absorbed much more fully into Hindu culture than their counterparts westward. India had a readymade framework for admitting these outsiders: it treated Greek warriors as members of the *ksatriya* caste who had decayed by failing to keep up the proper rituals. This status let them intermarry with Indian *ksatriya* families, while still keeping them a notch below the brahmins.³¹

The most serious Greek engagement with Indian civilisation was religious. There was much curiosity about Hindu spiritual practices, especially those of an esoteric or meditative flavour. The sophistication of Hinduism far outshone anything pagan Greece could offer at the time. Megasthenes, a Greek ambassador to the Maurya dynasty's court shortly after the death of Alexander, wrote a detailed description of Hindu religion, including the brahmins, Buddhists, and Jains. He called them 'philosophers' and 'theosophs' to fit them into Greek terminology. He also noted parallels between Greek and Indian thinking on the shape and origin of the universe. 'All that has been said regarding nature by the ancients', he remarked, 'is asserted also by philosophers out of Greece, on the one part in India by the brahmins, and on the other in Syria

by the people called the Jews.’ The spread of Greek culture eastward also met Buddhism radiating out from its Indian birthplace. Another surviving text called *Milinda’s Questions* recreates a dialogue between an important Greco-Indian ruler and a Buddhist guru. The Greek shows himself in awe of Buddhist wisdom and eager to access it. The same ruler apparently found other points of contact with Indian political culture, too. He minted coins depicting himself as a *chakravartin*, or universal ruler.³² In instances such as this, we see the beginnings of a third-order universalism even before the accomplishments of the Roman and Han empires. The trajectory of cosmopolitanism in history zigzags a good deal chronologically.

Zigzags also loop back on one another in bizarre ways. The legacy of Alexander as world conqueror descended into the European Middle Ages, with ever more romance and myth attached to it. One story said that during his advance into Asia, Alexander had built some huge gates in the Caucasus to pen in marauding nomads. At the end of time, the gates were going to burst and unleash the formerly enclosed hordes, predicted in the Bible as the nations of Gog and Magog. And surely enough in the 1230s, rumours began spreading that the gates had opened and the marauders were riding westward.³³

The marauders were the Mongols under Genghis Khan and his offspring. They were not the first, and would not be the last, rustic people to flood out of central Asia on to the sedentary zones of Europe, the Middle East, India, and China. One historian has used the metaphor of a volcano to describe how these cycles have worked. The volcano in the middle erupts, sending lava shooting out to the periphery. For those on the fringe, such an event seems catastrophic. But much like lava cooling and solidifying, the nomadic incursions eventually peter out and end up as just another layer in the history of settled life. Often the barbarian influence even ends up adding a certain spark to stagnant civilisations.³⁴

Even though they were not without their forerunners, the Mongols were an especially horrifying spectacle for civilised peoples. Since they had a superstition against immersing themselves in water, the stench of the unwashed warriors could waft downwind long distances as they approached a city. They had also acquired a fearsome reputation for sacking without mercy. The origin myth of the Mongol ruling dynasty, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, claimed that the clan descended from a wolf born with a divine blessing. They believed they were destined to rule the world, and that anyone insolently resisting them deserved to perish. If any doubt lingered, it would be removed by the tone of the

ultimatums that city-dwellers might be given to read while inhaling the odour of the waiting horsemen. ‘With the force of eternal Heaven, we the oceanic Khan of the great people’, they opened. One God in heaven corresponded to one ruler on earth. The conquests merely brought about in fact what already existed in theory.³⁵

Quite apart from their brutality, the Mongol rulers come across in the historical record as rather unsophisticated, with an earthy and pragmatic air. Theirs was the mentality of the tribal chieftain who yearned for respect and who had found an opportunity for it on a vaster scale than he had imagined. Despite their own lack of polish, they found no shortage of sophisticated sycophants in the territories they overran. One prominent example was Rashīd al-Dīn Fadlallāh Hamadānī, a Persian Jew who converted to Islam in the late 1200s and became an official under the Ilkhanate dynasty, a branch of the Mongol ruling family that had become Muslims and controlled much of southwest Asia. Rashīd al-Dīn wrote a fulsome account of the Ilkhanate monarchy as ‘a very heaven of magnificence and regality and a whole ocean of grandeur’. He made much of their free spending of public funds and their hard-headed knack for maintaining power. Conspicuously, he paid little attention to any cultivation of virtue or spiritual insight, which usually would have counted for something in any of the great civilisations. He opined instead, in a sentence that would have shocked Cicero and Xunzi, that ‘in this world there is no virtue above the acquisition of a good name’. Rashīd al-Dīn’s silver pen served him well for a while until his luck ran out. Accused of a plot to poison the ruler, he was brutally executed.³⁶

In the trajectory of cosmopolitanism, the Mongols are interesting less for their own sake than for the space they created for an encounter among the more sophisticated civilisations of Eurasia. Their conquests were especially disastrous for the Muslim world and China. But after the dust settled, the world benefited from the so-called Pax Mongolica in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. With one ruler, or clan of rulers, controlling the steppes and clamping down on brigandage, flows of trade along the old Silk Road picked up beyond the levels of the Roman–Han exchanges over a thousand years earlier, even though travel times were as long as three-and-a-half years overland from Europe to China. Different influences ran in different directions: technology and commerce more from east to west, and ideas and missionaries more from west to east.³⁷

At the peak of their power and unity as a dynasty, the Mongol emperors showed some evenhandedness towards the religions of Eurasia. Their heartland on the steppe had given rise to no influential religious doctrines and had no firm

affiliations. A vacuum waited to be filled. When he was based high in the Hindu Kush, Genghis Khan invited a Daoist monk named Chang Chun to visit him. He already ruled a huge chunk of the world, but he wanted to learn something spiritual as well. Chang Chun, like other Daoist monks, was treated with great respect and did not have to bow to the emperor. He also was indulged in his request to travel at a distance from the main corps of the Mongol army because the raucous soldiers disturbed his thinking. He explained to Genghis Khan that his knowledge was of a special sort – ‘Public affairs and affairs of war are not within my capacity’ – but he could offer some esoteric teachings as long as they were not disclosed to other people.³⁸

One avenue of contact opened by the Mongols was with Europe. By the mid-1200s, the early Mongol letters demanding submission gave way to a softer tone. Both sides were already sending out feelers about a possible alliance against the Muslims who sat between them. Reportedly, Christendom was promised Jerusalem in exchange for military aid and an agreement to divide Eurasia. The Europeans showed some openness to the idea, but were more interested in guaranteeing the protection of Christians under Mongol rule. In any case, the alliance never got off the ground because events shifted the attention of both sides in other directions.³⁹

In our search for cosmopolitan impulses, such high realpolitik is less interesting than the contacts between people that the Pax Mongolica made possible. Of the two most famous expeditions, one went eastward and one went westward. From Europe, a Flemish Franciscan friar named Willem van Ruysbroeck travelled to central Asia from 1253 to 1255, on a mission to convert the Mongols to Christianity.⁴⁰ The journey was trying due to hardships including inedible food and freezing cold. The windswept steppe in the dead of winter must have been particularly uncomfortable since he clung to the Franciscan habit of going about barefoot. The Mongols he met were amused. They asked him at one point whether he had no need for feet to get around, because remaining unshod, they would surely fall off sooner or later from frostbite.

When Ruysbroeck and his companions finally got to their meeting with the Mongol emperor, Möngke Khan, the opportunity seemed ripe for a fruitful dialogue. The emperor compared different religions to fingers on the same hand. During the half-year that Ruysbroeck spent at the ruler’s encampment, he was invited to join in debates with Nestorian Christians, Muslims, and the shamans of traditional Mongol folk religion. Conversation was challenging, partly

because his inept and often drunk interpreter had difficulty conveying the finer points of theology. In the debates among representatives of the different religions, Ruysbroeck and the Nestorians often ended up allying with the Muslims to defend monotheism against the shamans. No one really won, though the monotheists supposedly fared better, perhaps for the same reasons that the Spanish friars would out-argue the Nahua priests in Mexico in 1524. Ruysbroeck's hopes of converting the Mongols failed, however. Since he could not translate the substance of Christianity clearly, he ended up just having to appease people who wanted magical protection from demons. He would write out Latin incantations on strips of paper as talismans and hand them out, telling the recipients, 'Believe firmly what is written here, even if you cannot understand it.'

A contemporary of Ruysbroeck journeyed westward a few years later, though the two never met. Rabban Sawma was a Nestorian Christian, born in Mongol-ruled Beijing to a noble family of Turkic origin.⁴¹ He became a devout monk after giving away his belongings and retreating to meditate in a cave. He and a younger friend then decided to cleanse their sins by making a pilgrimage to the Nestorian holy sites in the Middle East. Bearing a letter of introduction by the emperor Kublai Khan, they travelled through Kashgar, Khurasan, and Kurdistan, but war frustrated their hopes of reaching Jerusalem. Then they spent eight years in Persia, also under Mongol rule by then. Despite his outsider status, Rabban Sawma's friend ended up settling in the Nestorian hub of Baghdad and being elected patriarch of the Nestorian Church, to reign as Yahbh-Allāhā III from 1281 to 1317. In the cosmopolitanism of the Middle Ages, a shared faith trumped differences of place and race.

Rabban Sawma himself wanted to move on. The Mongol ruler in Persia was impressed by his languages and travel experience and saw his faith as a bridge to Christendom. The monk was thus despatched to Europe as an ambassador to seek a grand alliance against the Muslims in between. He went on a tour of western Europe and was received by the kings of France and England and by the cardinals at Rome. As fellow Christians, though from different traditions and different corners of the world, Rabban Sawma and the Catholic cardinals were naturally curious about one another. They observed their two different ways of celebrating the Eucharist and found that the essence of the ritual was the same. They also got into discussion over the fine points of theology. The cardinals admired their Nestorian visitor's eloquence and found enough common ground in their doctrines not to count him a heretic.

Then Rabban Sawma made a remark that cannot help but disappoint as it echoes down through the centuries:

I have come from remote countries neither to discuss, not to instruct men in matters of the Faith.... If it be pleasing in your eyes, let us set aside discussion, and do ye give attention and direct someone to show us the churches here and the shrines of the saints.

On his circuit of Europe, Rabban Sawma comes across as something of the tourist. He was fascinated with the sights and the rituals and the relics but not especially interested in delving into ideas. This was also true for many mediæval pilgrims who made much shorter journeys than his. One expert has noted that pilgrims generated some of the largest amounts of travel writing but that they were usually superficial descriptions and showed little curiosity.⁴² The Pax Mongolica allowed encounters of this sort to take place. It raised contact between Eurasian civilisations to a level never seen before. That those encounters could now happen in several directions also held out some promise. But a real cosmopolitan breakthrough would have required more sustained encouragement from above. The Mongol political project of world empire would have had to take its intercivilisational and interreligious dimension much more seriously.

Here we can see the difference between the Mongol moment and the Alexandrian moment. Both the khans from the steppe and the young man from Macedonia wanted to conquer the world, and both brought rich civilisations together. Both also failed to bring about a lasting synthesis. They failed for different reasons, though. Alexander and the circle of people around him were sophisticated enough to have an inkling of what merging Greece, Persia, and India would involve. They were familiar with their own heritage and knew what might be worth taking from elsewhere. Yet the civilisations were not yet ready. It would take many more centuries, and cycles of stagnation and renaissance, for each civilisation separately to work through all the nuances of a second-order universalism and start pushing against its constraints. They also needed a more lasting acquaintance with each other. Alexander was ready to play the part, but the stage was still under construction.

When the Mongols burst forth from central Asia, conditions were riper. Something like the interreligious debates in the emperor's hut had become possible, with a richer toolkit of ideas to deploy. The civilisations were more or

less ready for a deeper encounter. The problem was that Genghis Khan's clan was ill-suited to oversee it. Their own tradition was quite unsophisticated, and their grasp of the settled civilisations weak. Mongol universalism was a gesture to the diversity of the territories they had overrun and was perhaps a passing fancy about dabbling in what clever monks might have to teach. It was not motive enough for a world civilisation. This time the stage was built and decorated, but the actor could not deliver his lines.

One sign that the Mongols were not up to the task is that, with civilisations such as the Muslim world and China pulling at the periphery of their empire, the centre could not hold. This largest of contiguous land empires in history could not last. By the time of Genghis Khan's death, tensions were arising among his heirs and within the Mongol aristocracy. They were split between a 'centripetal' approach, keeping the old Mongol values and harshly repressing conquered peoples, and a 'centrifugal' approach, employing foreign administrators and drawing on the religious and administrative models of their sedentary subjects. The latter policy won out quite quickly. Within a generation after Genghis Khan, many Turkish and Chinese generals were setting military strategy.⁴³

The established civilisations of Eurasia outlasted the Mongols. Patience and sophistication defeated sound and fury. One of the more astute observers in thirteenth-century Persia was Aṭā-Malik Juvaynī, who with his *History of the World Conqueror* became the most important Muslim chronicler of the Mongols. He drew on eyewitness accounts of earlier events as well as his own experience as a collaborationist official appointed by the conquerors. After the fall of Baghdad, he had landed on his feet as governor of much of Mesopotamia. Juvaynī argued that despite the brutality of the Mongol conquest, it would serve as a divine mechanism in history. The new rulers had wiped out troublesome Muslim heretics such as the Assassins and were creating the conditions for universal peace among all religions. Most importantly, he welcomed early signs that the branch of the Mongol dynasty ruling Persia was converting to Islam. Muslims rose swiftly in the Mongol hierarchy thereafter. Many Uyghurs from Turkestan became prominent administrators, and the Mongols adopted the Uyghur alphabet and much vocabulary.⁴⁴

The tone of Muslim confidence after the catastrophe of defeat was revealing. Juvaynī and those like him apparently felt, not without reason, that the vast open arena of the Pax Mongolica would serve them well. Like the Muslim clerics who joined forces with Ruysbroeck to debate the shamans, and the friars in Mexico who debated the Nahua, they took for granted that a free flow of ideas would

lead to their persuading pagans more than vice versa. They felt their own beliefs, given the chance, would have universal appeal.

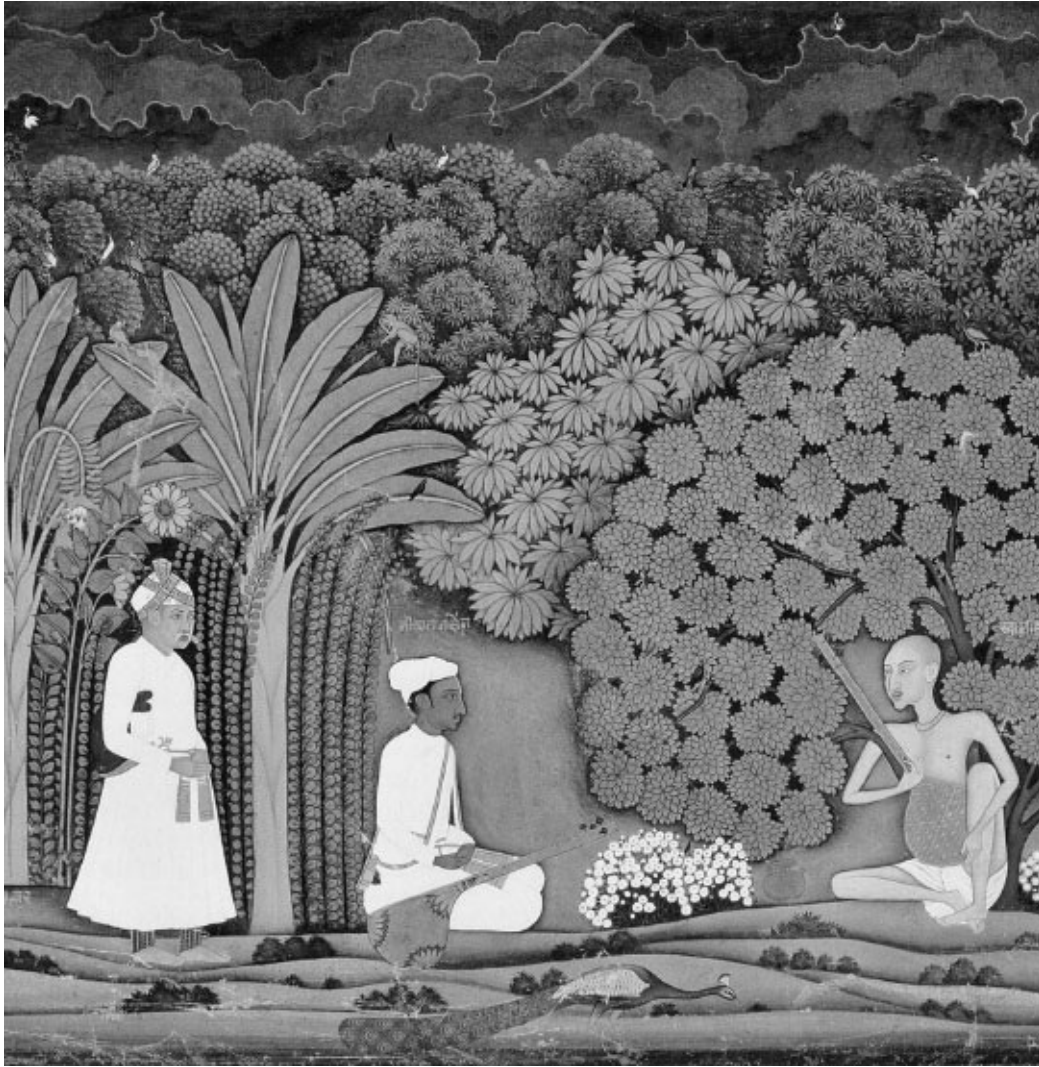
At the other end of the Mongol realms, the Chinese were also confident but in a different way. As the empire fragmented among Genghis Khan's descendants, the branch ruling China became steadily more sinicised as the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). Its economic focus shifted from marauding across the steppes to extracting revenue from settled agriculture in China proper. The Yuan adopted Buddhism. They also drew on Confucianism to legitimise their rule and began recruiting officials through examinations on the classics as previous dynasties had done. The flavour of Confucianism did reflect the peculiar position of the Mongols as a non-Chinese dynasty, though. Emphasis shifted a bit away from the cultural and literary interests of the Chinese elite and towards the abstract core of Confucian philosophy. A growing number of the Mongol elite also began taking the examinations themselves and earning degrees, thereby merging the vested interests of the erstwhile nomads and the indigenous carriers of Chinese civilisation. China did not have to spread her own civilisation across the continent to defeat the interlopers from central Asia. She could rely on her powers of attraction to absorb them on her own territory.⁴⁵

Within a century or two after the Mongols' conquests, their empire had fragmented and had been absorbed by the regional civilisations. The Muslims thought that they could export their own faith throughout the Mongol domains, though in practice they only managed to convert the branch of the dynasty that settled in Persia. The Chinese just waited out the layer of conquerors superimposed over them and turned them into Chinese. Both sides were still working within a second-order universalism, more or less. The Muslims aimed to enlarge their frontier and convert outsiders in distant lands; the Chinese drew outsiders into their own universe without having to enlarge it. The reality in both cultural zones ended up being closer to the latter than the former. The Mongols became civilised, so to speak.

In the end, we might say that a third-order universalism had cropped up in fleeting glimpses here and there. The debates in which Christians and Muslims could agree on some themes, or the mutual respect of Catholics and Nestorians when they met, hinted at a more sophisticated view than the sharp line between civilisation and barbarism. Even the rationale of Mongol curiosity about different faiths—saying that religions were fingers on the same hand—suggested a search for parallel virtues across the world. Yet such engagement did not go very far and did not build anything lasting. This was partly because of the

Mongols' lack of sophistication, but also because of the peculiar space they occupied. Much like the Manichaeans and other rootless cosmopolitans earlier, they had little grounding in the separate civilisations and imagined themselves in a vacuum among or above them. The difference was that where the Manichaeans had universal principles without power, the Mongols had universal power without principles. The Mongols wanted legitimacy from whoever would offer it and were happy to dabble in several traditions at once. But in the end they saw power as the master of truths. Founding a true world civilisation would have meant the opposite. It would have meant taking the multiple truths on offer as signposts to Truth, which in turn could inspire power.

This more promising approach required a universal space, and probably a political centre committed to pushing it forward. Ideas had to have practical weight in coming up with a blueprint for a real society larger than any of the separate civilisations. At the same time, a logic of truths leading to Truth also would mean building on the richest strands of thinking within each civilisation and weaving them together. Such resources were becoming more abundant in the Middle Ages, even if the Mongols were hardly in a position to draw on them. As we shall see in the next chapter, more sophisticated people were paving the way for a breakthrough.



A disguised Mughal Emperor Akbar and his court musician, Tansen, visiting the Hindu singer and poet Swami Haridas. Miniature painting, c.1750.

7 Missionaries, Mystics, and the Melding of Faiths

Whereas the world-conquering empires, from Alexander to the Mongols to the Habsburgs, did not reach their full potential, some intellectual currents throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance worked through these issues more seriously. What did these lines of thinking look like?

In the Muslim world, a real breakthrough to third-order universalism came in the writings of a few major mediæval philosophers. Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī was a Muslim scholar of hazy Persian or Turkish origin who spent most of his life in Baghdad in the late ninth century and the first half of the tenth. His education included studying ancient Greek texts under a Christian tutor, so he was well versed in Plato and Aristotle alongside Islamic theology. This familiarity with multiple traditions put al-Fārābī in much the same position as Aquinas in Europe. Committed to truth-seeking, he had to reconcile different sources of truth. Inspired partly by Islamic mysticism and partly by the ancient Greeks' distinction between the discerning few and the foolish many, he came up with a layered view of truth. Philosophy was universal, but ordinary people need more concrete symbolism and rituals and orthodoxy to flourish.¹

This was a slightly different approach from the one Aquinas devised. For Aquinas, religion was higher than philosophy even though they pointed in the same direction. His engagement with Islam was rather half-hearted: he used it mainly as a foil for developing Christian themes.² In contrast, al-Fārābī was inclined to see philosophy as higher and more placeless than any particular religion, even though he had to be careful about saying as much openly. One of his most interesting arguments hinged on the role of philosophers and prophets. They had a duty to help ordinary people live virtuously. To do so, they had to translate ultimate truths into day-to-day language. How this translation took place would vary in each society and each religious tradition. In keeping with Aristotle's supposed advice to Alexander, though, a world-state would be the

best way to cultivate virtue everywhere at once. Al-Fārābī's contemporary, the physician and philosopher Muḥammad ibn Zakariyā Rāzī, affirmed the same common ground among all faiths. The Qur'ān was immensely valuable, Rāzī insisted, but human reason and other religions also aimed at truth. Earlier prophets, despite their errors, were expressing the unity of God beneath different traditions.³

A century after al-Fārābī and Rāzī, yet another Persian named Abū Rayḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Bīrūnī applied the same ideas in his writings on India. After travelling widely in the subcontinent, he wrote one of the first serious Muslim overviews of India, particularly the northwestern provinces that had recently fallen under Muslim rule. He paid special attention to Hindu society and religion. Bīrūnī was ill disposed to much of what he was seeing. He painted a vivid picture of some of the more alien customs, including the rigid caste system, as signs of the 'innate perversity of the Hindu nature'. But despite scorning the 'hideous fictions' of popular Hinduism, he had more respect for what he saw as the true Hinduism of sophisticated brahmins. In every society, Bīrūnī argued, a cleavage ran between the educated who could understand higher truths and the masses who cleaved blindly to a tradition. To be evenhanded, he did acknowledge that popular Islam also had its own share of idiocies, such as projecting very human attributes on to God.⁴ In stressing the common inspiration of Islam and Hinduism—if one could get past the vulgar manifestations—Bīrūnī was following some of al-Fārābī's thinking. He was also engaging a key tenet of Hinduism itself. In the Bhagavad Gita, we find Krishna saying that 'Even those who are devotees of other gods, and sacrifice to them full of faith, really sacrifice to me.'⁵

This thinking appeared among some mediæval Christians as well. Take the German theologian Nicholas of Cusa. In 1453, within two months after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks, and while tales of Muslim atrocities still swirled in the air, he wrote a treatise called *De Pace Fidei* ('On the Peace of Faith'). All knowledge was ultimately one, he argued, though only the philosophically inclined could appreciate it. For 'the unlettered people' burdened by daily cares, more concrete revelations made God accessible. The details of revelation would be different for each society, with its own prophets and lawgivers. Beneath such diversity, 'there is only one religion in the variety of rites'. All faiths represent the one transcendent God, just as all commandments go back to godly love. Unlike that deep constant, the rites and duties that express it could vary across time and space. They were signs of faith, but should not be

confused with faith itself.⁶

Thinkers such as al-Fārābī, Rāzī, Bīrūnī, and Nicholas of Cusa were groping towards a third-order universalism. They were ready to acknowledge—often despite the reservations of more mainstream minds—that religions and civilisations other than their own were grounded on the same truth. Virtuous people could appear beyond one’s own frontier, quite independently of anything one’s own tradition had offered to enlighten them. Pushed far enough, this logic meant that the hard-and-fast boundary between inside and outside, between civilisation and barbarism, was beginning to break down in their minds. Of course, only a few imaginative and discerning souls would put forth such views, and they did so mainly as an intellectual exercise that had little impact on society. But this intellectual track was important nonetheless, in parallel with the political track of world conquest that the Mongols would undertake. Even though the two tracks did not connect, the intellectual breakthrough to a third-order universalism, in pockets here and there, was enriching the separate traditions and laying some promising groundwork.

What happens when this trajectory goes further? What if we bring sophisticated representatives of different civilisations into contact, in a congenial environment with a sustained purpose? Here we begin to see a real third-order universalism, fully refined, and even a foreshadowing of something beyond it.

Two intriguing instances of a truly advanced cosmopolitanism happened in the second half of the 1500s. By this time, the Americas had fallen under European rule, but Europe had not yet secured an advantage over the civilisations of Asia. With the industrial revolution not even on the horizon, the four core regions of Eurasia were in rough parity with each other. The Habsburgs ruled much of Europe in a patchwork of inherited domains. The Ottoman empire had consolidated its control over the Middle East. Northern India was ruled by the Muslim Mughal dynasty, descendants of Persianised Mongols, who were forming a second power centre to rival the Ottomans for leadership of the Muslim world.⁷ And in China, the Ming had long since thrown out the Mongol Yuan dynasty and had a few generations left before the Manchus would sweep in from the northeast and displace them in turn. All four cultural zones were diverse, prosperous, and confident in their own ways. With long experience of cultural and religious influences flowing in all directions, as well as the rise and fall of empires, they were also much more intellectually sophisticated than their predecessors.

The first of the two encounters involved Europe and China. In 1583, a group

of Jesuits headed by Matteo Ricci arrived in China. Ricci would spend the rest of his life in a succession of bases in Guangdong, Nanjing, and Beijing. He had come with a strategy for converting China to Christianity, starting from the top down with the educated elite at the Ming court. The Jesuit effort to evangelise China would continue well into the 1600s after Ricci's death. This encounter also started a flow of ideas the other way via the first translations of the Confucian classics into European languages.⁸

Ricci had been born into the minor Italian nobility. He had a prodigious memory that helped him become one of the first Europeans to learn Chinese fluently. He also had sustained contact with Chinese society, though his diaries reveal that he did not always enjoy the experience. He wrote detailed commentaries on daily customs, some of which struck him as novel and others as barbaric. He also complained about the corruption and hypocrisy of Ming China, as well as the juxtaposition of pomp and squalor. He found it difficult to overcome the Chinese 'innate fear and distrust' of outsiders, and the assumption that the Middle Kingdom included the entire world except for some barbaric or animalistic creatures at the fringes. Apparently the scholar-officials did not take kindly at first to the Jesuits' world maps showing China as merely part of the eastern end of Eurasia. Ricci eventually drew new maps depicting the same geography, but with China at the middle. Europe was also revealed to lie so far away that the Chinese had little reason to fear designs of conquest.⁹

The annoyances of daily life aside, Ricci took China seriously and wanted to engage it. He had plenty of resources on which to draw in making sense of the country and making Christianity resonate with different people. They included a long-honed Catholic strategy of learning about other religions as a starting point for evangelising, as well as his familiarity with the Greek and Roman classics and the humanism of the Renaissance. Indeed, Ricci saw the Greek and Roman heritage as vital because the challenge of fitting Christianity into China seemed rather like the earlier experience of Christianising the Roman empire.¹⁰

Ricci's personal adaptability went a long way in reaching out to his intended audience. First he wore Buddhist robes to blend in, then switched to the attire of the Confucian scholars to gain more respectability. He made a point of presenting himself as a fellow intellectual rather than the ambassador of a foreign state. To gain entry to elite circles, he had to master Chinese and learn to read and write essays in the classical style. This was no mean feat, but it was the only way to win credibility among the scholar-officials and be able to discuss ideas with them as an equal. As time went on, Ricci and his companions won

genuine admiration. Priestly celibacy drove home the point that these outsiders took their ethical mission seriously. They also went to great lengths to present the best of European humanistic culture, including some tracts from the Stoics. They showed that Europe was an equally civilised cultural centre with a long history. As cultured gentlemen, the Jesuits acquired a better image than the unsavoury European merchants at Macao who seemed obsessed with money, women, and drink.¹¹

Those Chinese scholar-officials close to the Jesuits respected them deeply. One convert, Yang Tingyun, was hardly a maverick in general and continued to uphold many habits of Chinese life. He saw Christianity as a source of moral improvement, compatible with Confucianism but filling in some of the gaps on the nature of God and personal immortality. He especially admired the Jesuits' simplicity and frugality, referring to them at one point as 'Western Confucians' (西儒 *xīrú*). Another high official, Ye Xianggao, was equally well disposed to them though not himself a convert. In one poem that blended second and third-order universalism, he wrote that '[o]ur sage ruler's influence covers all nine corners of the world; all lands reveal themselves as following the same path.' Of one of Ricci's fellow Jesuits, he remarked, 'Pedantic Confucians may confine themselves to pipe-wide vision; but the broadminded naturally regard his teachings as equal to ours.'¹²

Admiration went both ways. Like many European intellectuals of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, Ricci was impressed that China was governed by what amounted to an order of learned philosophers, who valued letters rather than arms. He praised the Confucians' search for wisdom over the millennia, just as the Greeks and Romans had studied natural law. While China was still living in 'pagan darkness', it had 'sufficient natural enlightenment' to know something was missing and to be open to what would fill the gap. That solution was Christianity, he insisted. Human reason and the true doctrine of heaven were placeless, and deviations from truth anywhere were falsehood, plain and simple. To find a point of entry, Ricci appealed back from neo-Confucianism to classical Confucianism. Classical Confucianism was akin to natural law and did not have to go. Neo-Confucianism, the mediæval synthesis of Confucianism with Buddhist metaphysics, smacked a bit too much of heresy for him. Doctrines that seemed divine might just be devilishly misleading, based on their resemblance to truth.¹³

The mutual sympathy between Christians and Confucians ran deeper than diffuse admiration or a sense that both traditions were basically healthy. Both

sides seized on some specific points of contact. Ricci emphasised self-cultivation. The pursuit of virtue ran through the argument in one of his tracts in classical Chinese, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*. This tapped into Confucian sensibilities—‘cultivate yourself and pacify the world under Heaven’—as well as harking back to the likes of Cicero. But Ricci went on to say that Christianity added depth to what one was cultivating and why. True human purposes lay not within the world but beyond it. The contrast between the gentleman (君子 *jūnzi*) and the petty person (小人 *xiǎorén*) in life was mirrored by the cosmic choice of heaven or hell. Ricci pointed out that the most important kind of self-cultivation was caring for one’s immortal soul. He thought the Christian knowledge of a personal, transcendent God filled in an important gap in Confucianism: namely, the motivation to train one’s will and overcome sin. Book learning alone, without faith, could not get one all the way.¹⁴

Those scholar-officials who converted, such as Yang Tingyun, found Ricci’s argument compelling. In many ways, late Ming China was ready for a new spiritual message. Elite culture was sophisticated, to be sure, but also rather jaded and with an air of exhaustion about it, not unlike Rome before Christianity. The converts were disenchanted by the intellectual unease around them and spiritually curious. They embraced Christianity as a source of moral authority. They wanted certainty, not the tired and rather casual introspection of those around them. That did not mean, however, that in becoming Christian they abandoned Confucianism. They felt, much as Ricci had suggested based on ancient Roman experience, that Christianity was filling a vital gap but that Confucianism in general was quite compatible with it. The new religion should be ‘inculturated’, so to speak. Educated Chinese Christians wanted a middle ground with the best of both traditions. They wanted to bridge Christianity and Confucianism without leaving their loyalty to either in doubt. This desire was most salient among some of the high-level scholar-officials. Those a layer below, such as the lower and middling administrators, tended to look askance at such blending of the authentically ‘Chinese’ and the ‘foreign’.¹⁵

Even among the counterparts most open to each other, however, there were a few sticking points. Agreeing on self-cultivation did not automatically resolve knottier issues. One area of dispute was about how to translate key spiritual concepts. Was the Christian God really the same entity as the Confucian Heaven? Some metaphysical claims also had to be taken apart further. What was the exact relationship between body and soul? How equal could souls be before God, when they were so unequal in the world? The rituals of religious

observance were also a sensitive matter. Could a Chinese convert make sacrifices to ancestors without crossing the line into idolatry and violating the first commandment? Some of these issues were easier to talk through than others. But even dialogue between the two sides was imagined in different ways. For the Jesuits, universal Christian doctrine was key, and large parts of Confucianism were to be preserved and rearranged around it. For the Confucians, Christianity offered spiritual inspiration, but conversion was a process of adopting what appealed to them and reconciling it with their existing patterns of life. Even the awareness of common ground sometimes included contrasting implications. From one angle, it proved that Christianity could enter because Chinese thought already foreshadowed it. From another angle, it proved that Christianity was an acceptable offshoot of ancient Chinese thought.¹⁶

Both sides did basically agree that Christianity's centre of gravity was in spiritual enlightenment, and Confucianism's in social ethics. If they could get past the nuances of how the two interlocked, then this division of labour could work well enough. But for Christianity to enter China in this way, it had to displace what already filled the spiritual niche. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Ricci's praise for Confucianism was matched by his disdain for Daoism and Buddhism. Their relationship to Confucian social ethics was roughly what he was proposing for Christianity. He called Daoist and Buddhist teachings 'nonsensical trifles' and 'ravings' that might come from the devil. He could not accept, as some Confucians sympathetic to Buddhism proposed, that figures such as Buddha and Jesus were just regional deputies of a universal God. 'There is only one truth', he insisted, 'and the Way lies in harmonising oneself with that truth.'¹⁷

The Buddhists who met Ricci could not stand him, either. Yet their preferred argument against Christianity was rather different. They did not say that Buddhism was universally true and Christianity universally false. They pleaded instead for the integrity of Chinese culture. Confucianism and Buddhism had been grafted on to one another through long exposure. They urged the Confucians to reject efforts to carve up Chinese civilisation surgically. Christianity could not just be slotted in on top of Confucian social ethics. Rather, it was a barbarian import alien to China and should be rejected.¹⁸

Here we can see the legacy of earlier solutions to the problem of how different belief systems intersect in a given society. Buddhism had flourished in a niche within Chinese civilisation by forsaking some of its earlier universal energy. It had been domesticated and defanged, so to speak. Instead of arguing with the Jesuits about human truths, the Buddhists were falling back on a kind of easy

tribalism. They were saying, in effect, that Buddhism should be preserved because it was passably Chinese, not because it was true. This defensive argument was also the resort of some Chinese astronomers when confronted with Jesuit science. Feeling the ground shifting under their feet and the heavens shifting over their heads, they sputtered indignantly that it would be better to keep Chinese astronomy, whatever its predictive inaccuracies, than to adopt a wholly different European framework and thereby acknowledge that Europeans had something to teach about the cosmos.¹⁹

Another area of Chinese pushback against the Jesuits was political. Much like the Manichaeans earlier, the Jesuits were seen as suspect and hard to control because their loyalties cut across empires. A recurring Middle Kingdom paranoia towards outsiders came out in some circles of high officialdom. They criticised Ricci for wanting to transform Chinese culture. Indeed, missionaries of his sort were tolerable only if they conformed enough not to threaten the established order. They could never be naturalised as full members of society without taking a humbler view of their relationship to political authority, as many Chinese Muslims and Jews had already done.²⁰

The level of toleration toward the Jesuits declined over time. Early on, during the late Ming period, Ricci's circle struck up a good rapport with influential scholar-officials. After the Qing replaced the Ming in the late 1600s, the missionaries enjoyed a conditional toleration. Emperor Kangxi let them practise because they behaved peacefully, though he also praised them for not attempting mass conversions that would destabilise society. In 1727, however, Emperor Yongzheng clamped down on Christianity. He said that the demand for ultimate loyalty to God and the Church would undermine political order. He also went back to a much more relativistic view of religious truth. Each part of the world had its own prevailing faith, he said, and they should be willing to coexist peacefully, aware of the strong and weak points of each, rather than trying to spread one truth worldwide.²¹

Many of these conflicts had less to do with the substance of each tradition than with the interests of competing groups on both sides and the political sensitivities of those in power. The most important dispute about content arose in the so-called 'Rites Controversy' of the late 1600s and early 1700s. I noted earlier some obvious ways in which, despite agreeing on the value of self-cultivation, Christians and Confucians still had some sticking points to work through. One of those areas was the compatibility of rituals and terminology.

The Rites Controversy came out of changing missionary tactics over the

decades after Ricci's death, and especially after the mid-1600s. New generations of missionaries lacked the Jesuits' flexibility in adapting doctrine to China's cultural context. One such missionary, the catalyst for the Rites Controversy, was a French bishop named Charles Maigrot de Crissey. He settled in China in the 1680s, a century after Ricci, and took an instant dislike to much of what Chinese Christianity had become. In 1693, he issued an edict prohibiting seven practices of accommodation that dated back to Ricci.

First, God was to be called 'Lord of Heaven' (天主 *Tiānzhǔ*), a specifically Christian term, rather than the more ambiguous old Chinese terms 'Heaven' (天 *Tiān*) or 'Lord on High' (上帝 *Shàngdì*). Second, no tablets in churches should say 'worship Heaven' (敬天 *Jìng Tiān*) or 'worship the Lord on High' (敬上帝 *Jìng Shàngdì*). Third, Christians could not worship Confucius. Fourth, Christians could not worship their ancestors. Fifth, converts could keep in their houses no tablets honouring ancestors unless these had been modified to avoid idolatry. Sixth, missionaries should not pretend that there were no contradictions between Christianity and Confucianism or that their original meanings were compatible. Seventh, Christians should not read Confucian texts of an atheistic or other flavour at odds with Christian doctrine.²²

These rules were eventually confirmed by the Vatican and during the first half of the 1700s became fixed in missionary practice. Given how important the Confucian rituals were socially for Chinese, particularly those of the scholar-official class, this rigid approach more or less doomed the missionary effort thereafter.²³ Maigrot and other Catholic priests who took this hardline approach have fared poorly in historical accounts. One historian has called the Rites Controversy the victory of 'the tone-deaf party'. It has been considered part of the puritanical backlash of the Counter-Reformation against the Renaissance. Even the mental predispositions of men such as Maigrot have come under attack. They have been accused of jealousy toward the intellectual agility of the Jesuits. It has also been suggested that by the late 1600s, the Church had abandoned rigorous training in casuistic reasoning, which had given earlier Jesuits such as Ricci the flexibility to respect cultural nuances.²⁴

Of course, we should not overdo it in condemning one side in this debate. Maigrot was sincere in making this difficult choice. He firmly believed that only Christianity was true and that all other religions were either superstition or disguised atheism. Another historian more sympathetic to his views suggested that the hardliners were not 'diminutive moralists' as often portrayed. Ricci, he suggests, sometimes came across as ingratiating and willing to be all things to all

people. Indeed, many of the hardliners were fonder of Chinese civilisation than they might seem. One figure who supported Maigrot's position, though he spent less time in China, was the Dominican missionary Domingo Fernández Navarrete. Navarrete praised China extensively in his writing. He admired the Chinese elite's gentility and discipline, and fitted the Confucian thinkers into a natural law tradition as 'the Athenians of Asia'. Indeed, he kept fond memories of China for the rest of his life, even after being posted to the Caribbean. He considered China superior to his homeland, Spain, in almost every area except religion. Navarrete parted company with the Jesuits, however, in worrying that Christianity might end up absorbed into some sort of shapeless Asian syncretism. He insisted that he respected Chinese intelligence too much to treat converts like savages. He would take them seriously and demand that they uphold Christian orthodoxy.²⁵

Much of the difference in outlook between the Jesuits and these later Dominican missionaries was due to the levels of Chinese society with which they interacted. Jesuits such as Ricci had a top-down strategy focused on the scholar-officials. Such men saw Confucianism largely as a system of social ethics. The Dominicans after the 1600s spent most of their time instead with the lower classes, especially on the coast of Fujian. Popular Confucianism had a more superstitious flavour that came into obvious tension with Christianity. The risks of accommodation seemed too great. Ironically, despite their strictness, the Dominicans got many more converts, especially from the ranks of peasants, artisans, merchants, lower-level army officers, and former Buddhists. The lower classes had less of a stake than the scholar-officials in upholding Confucianism. They could abandon established rituals without losing prestige, because they had no prestige in the first place.²⁶

During those decades, therefore, Christianity and Confucianism were really meeting on several different planes at the same time. At the top, we have the scholar-officials who were comfortable with Ricci's views on a division of labour between Confucianism and Christianity. They could keep their own high-culture tradition of social ethics while adopting Christianity for spiritual inspiration. The Jesuits interpreted both Christianity and Confucianism in ways that would make doing so acceptable. Below the scholar-officials, we have the more orthodox Confucians who looked askance at the cosmopolitan elite's eagerness to mix and match 'Chinese' and 'foreign' beliefs. And at the bottom, we have the wholehearted conversion—really a switch from one civilisation to another—by those willing to abandon Confucianism and adhere to Christian

orthodoxy. Hardline missionaries such as Maigrot and Navarrete fully respected them as converts but made them choose their side and stick with it. Syncretic blending, with one foot in each civilisation, smacked too much of pride, convenience, and sloppy thinking. Thus the overall picture is one of cosmopolitanism at the top, defensive orthodoxy a bit below, and at the bottom a willingness to convert wholesale because one has nothing to lose.

Many of the same issues were at stake in another important encounter of the late 1500s. At about the same time Ricci was starting his mission in China, another cosmopolitan experiment was underway on the other side of the Himalayas, in Mughal India. Emperor Akbar presided over a religiously diverse subcontinent. India's identity had become more complex in the preceding centuries, as the Muslim conquests disrupted a straightforward overlap of India and Hinduism. The large Muslim population, descended from both conquerors and converts, was beginning to think of itself as a distinct community of Indian Muslims within the wider Muslim world. India's diversity ran through all layers of society, from the poorest peasants to a Mughal elite that, while still predominantly Muslim, had also incorporated some Hindu *ksatriya* princes. For the elite, religious affiliation mattered less than fitting into a common Persian-flavoured court culture. Faced with this diversity, the Mughals had long adopted a religious policy much more tolerant than what one would find at the time in the Habsburg or even Ottoman empires.²⁷

Akbar's own decisions as emperor built on this foundation. He was a product of forces that might have converged in time anyway, but he did push the empire much further in a multireligious direction. His personality had much to do with this impulse: he had a genuine spiritual curiosity.²⁸

Apart from Akbar, the most important figure in this episode of Mughal cosmopolitanism was his vizier, Abū'l-Faḥl ibn Mubārak 'Allāmī. The latter came from a distinguished family ultimately of Yemeni origin though long settled in India. His mystic father had been persecuted by the '*ulamā*' for unorthodoxy, which rather soured the son's attitude toward them for the rest of his life. Abū'l-Faḥl's early education revealed a remarkable intellectual talent. As he put it himself, in his youth he 'traversed the wide field of wisdom, and the ample space of the doctrines of many schools'. He took a long time to decide between a life of ascetic withdrawal from the world and one of pursuing a reputation at the Mughal court, where his brother was already an accomplished poet. Eventually he chose to engage the world and joined the intimate circle around Akbar.²⁹

By some accounts, Akbar's basic religious policy was already in place before he met Abū'l-Faḥl. But even if the environment created Abū'l-Faḥl's trajectory rather than vice versa, it took someone like him to flesh out what was at stake. The emperor was spiritually curious, but his knowledge of Islamic thought was quite scattered. Despite a rich heritage on which to draw, he was probably no more qualified intellectually to pursue a new cosmopolitanism than the untutored Mongol emperors had been three centuries before. Only Abū'l-Faḥl could frame a coherent argument for going beyond mere tolerance toward Hindus and other non-Muslims to including them on an equal footing in the state. As Abū'l-Faḥl saw it, Akbar had created the political conditions for human fellowship. In the expanding empire, he had 'subdued, disciplined, and soothed the tribes of mankind and bestowed on them unity of sentiment'. Now it would be possible to 'inaugurate universal peace ... [to] regard all conditions of humanity, and all sects of religion with the single eye of favour, and not be-mother some and be-stepmother others'. In an early move to create a common citizenship, Akbar abolished the discriminatory *jizyah* tax on Hindus.³⁰

The core of this new religious policy was an exchange of wisdom. Abū'l-Faḥl welcomed Akbar's encouragement but was already enthusiastic about the project himself. In his youth he had felt dissatisfied with the Islamic tradition of his birth and had decided to seek wisdom everywhere from the Jesuits to Lebanon to Tibet to China. Akbar supported Abū'l-Faḥl's opening of a bureau of translation, which would compile non-Islamic religious texts and translate them into Persian, the court language. Soon the court library had translations of the Bible as well as Sanskrit works such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. In a sign of his cosmopolitan sympathies, Abū'l-Faḥl's preface to the *Mahabharata* began with 'Sri Ganesaya namah' ('Reverence to Lord Ganesha'). It also explained that the purpose of translating was to give discerning people direct access to wisdom from all traditions.³¹

Not only texts, but also people, were to meet in dialogue. Between about 1575 and 1582, Akbar convoked a forum for religious discussion called the 'Ibādat Khāna. He sent far afield for learned theologians, mystics, and philosophers to form what Abū'l-Faḥl called an 'assemblage of the wise of every religion and sect'. They included nearly everyone: Sufis, Hindus, Jains, Jesuits, Sabians, Zoroastrians, and others. The aim of the debates was that

the masters of science and ethics, and the devotees of piety and contemplation, be tested, the principles of faiths and creeds be examined,

religions be investigated, the proofs and evidences for each be considered, and the pure gold and the alloy be separated from evil commixture.

Akbar presided. Abū'l-Faẓl took an active part in discussions and often used his better Arabic and razor-sharp logic to outmanoeuvre more orthodox Muslim clerics. Unsurprisingly, the debates got so heated that they eventually had to be shut down.³²

Akbar was aiming in the long run to found a new religion, mixing the best insights from all traditions. It appeared in 1582 as the Din-i-Ilahi, or 'Divine Faith'. Given the rather esoteric tone of the discussions, it was apparently intended more as a mystical order or circle of likeminded people than a religion for mass conversion. Abū'l-Faẓl joined along with a handful of people from the Muslim and Hindu elites, numbering as few as nineteen by one count. Akbar adopted what one critic has called a 'haphazard agglomeration of certain rituals, whimsically visualised and pompously demonstrated', suggesting that he 'thought that religious traditions could be edited like a book of anthology'. He prayed in sequence, in Christian, Islamic, and Hindu fashions, and adopted some practices of sun and fire worship from the Zoroastrians as well.³³

As Abū'l-Faẓl hastened to point out, such outward rituals were almost beside the point. They just gave ordinary people something to see. In keeping with the spirit of Sufi and Hindu mysticism, the inner meaning of religious faith mattered more. Abū'l-Faẓl has been dubbed 'an aristocrat to his fingertips', and such élitism carried over into his view of spiritual insight. '[T]he power of God has established a great gap between the merits of the various sections of mankind', he explained. Not everyone could access the higher understanding of those who participated in Akbar's religious debates. God 'gives to some comprehensiveness, and to others narrowness of disposition.... [T]he ray of such wisdom does not light up every house, nor could every heart bear such knowledge.' Only a select few would even be attracted to the idea of digging beneath traditions to find common ground. Akbar's circle was 'the rendezvous of the elite of the earth.... [S]o do the solitary ones of the seven climes leave their native lands and turn their faces towards this holy gateway and there attain felicity.' '[I]n the spicery of varied traditions there are remedies for melancholy.'³⁴

Such remarks combined with the spectacle at the Mughal court to drive some orthodox Muslim clerics up the wall. Abū'l-Faẓl's arch-rival was the historian and translator 'Abd al-Qādir Badā'ūnī. Badā'ūnī has not fared well in the history

books. He gave his critics plenty of fodder with his harsh words against Akbar's tolerance of Hindus. He even wrote a curse-filled celebratory account about the slaying of some Hindu 'infidels' and expressed disgust with Abū'l-Faẓl's translations from Sanskrit, saying the content of such works was ridiculous.³⁵

But Badā'ūnī was also quite learned and has been called 'one of the most erudite scholars of his age'. He thought the '*ulamā*' could be too narrowminded on occasion. When some of them started shouting in the 'Ibādat Khāna debates, Akbar said that those who could not behave would have to leave. Badā'ūnī dryly remarked to the emperor that if that happened, none of them would be left. He was no more a narrow conformist himself than were some of the hardline missionaries in China such as Maigrot and Navarrete. Indeed, he was a sexual libertine according to some accounts, though he felt it only proper to maintain the public sanctity of *shariah* law and to reason within Islam rather than abandoning it.³⁶

Badā'ūnī's quarrel with Abū'l-Faẓl was about what the latter said, as well as how he said it. He disliked him personally and saw him as a flatterer who was leading Akbar even deeper into heresy. He noted that literary and mystical circles at the Mughal court had long disdained Islamic learning. Coming out of that unhealthy environment, Abū'l-Faẓl was the 'man that set the world in flames' because he 'took up a lamp in broad daylight, and represent[ed] himself as opposed to all sects'. Badā'ūnī found the whole enterprise of the 'Ibādat Khāna intolerable because it put 'man's reason, not tradition' at the centre of religious thinking. Akbar and Abū'l-Faẓl even let representatives of other religions speak freely against Islam and ganged up with them against the Muslim clerics. It seemed sometimes that Akbar 'picked and chose from anyone except a Muslim'.³⁷

Abū'l-Faẓl's response to critics such as Badā'ūnī hinged on the question of how to know what was true. 'Many simpletons, worshippers of imitative custom, mistake the traditions of the ancients for the dictates of reason.' Blind adherence to any tradition, Islam included, 'has become the lock on the treasury of truth-seeking'. True wisdom could come only from direct spiritual experience and sincere questioning. A handful of people in each age could understand the truth on that level. Others were not so fortunate, including many 'ill-starred wretches' among the educated. Those 'formalists who dwell within the four walls of routine' had to struggle to absorb some fragments of knowledge, passed down from more discerning souls who had grasped it firsthand. And as for the masses, they could not understand even that much, and moreover could not see anything

beyond the superficially learned clerics who lorded it over them. Abū'l-Faẓl argued that interreligious dialogue would bypass some of this intellectual stagnation. By comparing traditions with each other, they could bring to light the forgotten inspiration beneath all of them. Yes, this meant unnerving the closed-minded traditionalists—‘the bigoted followers of Muḥammad’s religion’, as he tactlessly called them—but it was the only way to scrape off the ‘ever-during rust, layer upon layer’ that had obscured truth over time.³⁸

To be fair, much that Akbar and Abū'l-Faẓl did smacked not merely of evenhanded curiosity but of actual hostility toward Islam. Late in Akbar’s reign, the Islamic calendar was replaced with one based on old Persian cycles. Abū'l-Faẓl put Arabic books in the last position in the court library. Akbar then banned study of Arabic altogether because it was being used in theological arguments against his policy. New burial practices had the dead placed with their heads east, toward the rising sun, and their feet insultingly toward Mecca. Some minarets were razed and some mosques turned into stables.³⁹

Such actions provoked hostility not only from people such as Badā'ūnī. They also widened the gulf between the court and ordinary Muslims.⁴⁰ Even members of the imperial family began pushing back against such policies. Abū'l-Faẓl, having made himself rather unpopular with Akbar’s future successor, was killed in 1602, his head being cut off and despatched as a trophy. Akbar himself died three years later. In parallel with the move away from cosmopolitanism among missionaries in China, by the late 1600s the religious policy of the Mughals had swung back to a more intolerant position. Sectarian and regional identities surged up again.⁴¹ Of Akbar’s religious experiment, little remains. If you walk today around Fatehpur Sikri, his shortlived new capital near Agra, you can see only an eerily abandoned complex of well-preserved reddish stone buildings. On a soaring pillar in what was reputedly the ‘Ibādat Khāna, engravings of Islamic, Hindu, Christian, and other symbols remain but mostly are ignored by the occasional visitors who wander through.

These two encounters in the late 1500s—the Jesuits in China and the experiments at the Mughal court—were perhaps the most advanced cosmopolitan moments before the modern era. Both had their obvious failures and blind spots, as we have seen. Yet they also built on centuries of growing intellectual sophistication about the nature of each separate civilisation and the likely points of contact among them. The participants had reached the stage of a third-order universalism, being aware of parallel wisdom in the different traditions and being able fully to respect virtuous ‘outsiders’. We can also see

the beginnings of what we might call a fourth-order universalism. In a fourth-order universalism, one does not stop at respecting wisdom that arises elsewhere. One breaks through to wanting to learn from it, because all civilisations are part of a common human project. If the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, then one will get a fuller understanding of the human condition by bringing civilisations together.

As these two experiments show, we can think of the underlying common ground on more than one level. For Jesuits such as Ricci and converts such as Yang Tingyun, it involved both the virtues and religious truth. The virtues of the humanistic European tradition and of Confucian social ethics were roughly the same. The European gentleman and the Chinese gentleman could recognise each other as kindred spirits. This provided a starting point for dialogue. They also agreed that people everywhere needed spiritual inspiration. Christianity could fill a gap in Ming China just as it had filled a gap in the pagan world of the Greco-Roman Mediterranean. As universal truth, it belonged to everyone and could be accepted anywhere. Those who held this view felt that human beings would flourish with a mix of Christian faith plus one or another tradition of gentlemanly virtue. While they did not say as much, it is also easy to imagine room for plenty of cross-fertilisation among the traditions of virtue ethics, such as between Confucianism and Aristotelianism.

For the circle around Akbar and Abū'l-Faḥl, the common ground among traditions was different. They had much less interest in social ethics. Instead, they sought spiritual truth on a rather esoteric plane. They believed that all traditions were mere shadows of true inspiration. Discerning people could seek mystical experience directly. Or they could take the next-best approach of reasoning together to reveal the essence of the several traditions. The conversations at the 'Ibādat Khāna were about discovering something that had been obscured by custom and by separation. The tone also differed between someone such as Ricci and someone such as Abū'l-Faḥl. Ricci took the traditions in question seriously and believed that he had to master them before he could converse meaningfully. His synthesis also would preserve the traditions by having them interlock with each other. Abū'l-Faḥl was more of an escapist. He wanted to bash the traditions against one another to loosen them up. Only then could one pierce through to discover something that the tradition-bound could never really see for themselves. His synthesis was an overcoming of traditions, though supposedly not of their divine source.

Through these and other encounters described so far, we can see that different

traditions were really engaging each other in layers. These were not exercises in mixing and matching traditions as wholes. Much hinged instead on disentangling layers within each tradition to find the real points of contact. In the same way, the sources of conflict varied depending on which layer each person thought most important.

To simplify, we might think of each tradition (or culture or civilisation) as having four levels (see [Table 7.1](#)). The surface level, the stuff on which many of the travel writers focused, is *practices*. These include the Hindu customs that Bīrūnī saw as signs of ‘innate perversity’, the Confucian rites that so offended Maigrot and Navarrete, and the Islamic symbols that Abū’l-Faẓl tweaked in order to provoke the complacent. The level of practices varies the most across traditions and is the hardest to translate. Receiving the Eucharist and facing Mecca to pray really are not the same thing, in appearance or in fact.

Table 7.1 Four levels of a tradition or culture

| |
|-------------------------|
| <i>practices</i> |
| <i>propositions</i> |
| <i>ethoses</i> |
| <i>bedrock humanity</i> |

A level below practices are *propositions*. These are claims about higher realities or the purpose of life. Among them might be the relationship between human reason and bodily appetites, the source of a divine revelation, or the circumstances in which a ruler could lose legitimacy. Propositions become the building blocks of religions, philosophies, and ideologies. Since any one proposition is too specific to make up a whole system on its own, they have to be assembled into an interpretation of the world. Since they are a bit more abstract than practices, propositions often crop up across different traditions and places. This means that one can find rough analogies elsewhere, at least for some of them. They can also be mixed and matched in new combinations, assuming one chooses propositions that do not contradict each other.

Still further down, we have what I call *ethoses*. These are types of character that map loosely on to social roles. In any culture, we might find people who are cultivated gentlemen, world-renouncing mystics, dutiful villagers, mercenary cynics, and so on. We could come up with different classifications, to be sure, but the key point is that these ethoses are quite few. They also cut across time

and space. People with the same ethos do not differ in their essential character. But they do differ in the propositions they use to describe themselves and their place in the world and in the practices that flesh out their ways of life. Because ethoses are cross-cultural—any complex society will have all of them—they are one obvious point of contact, one level on which people superficially different might recognise one another.

At the very lowest level, we find a *bedrock humanity*. This level is the most universal, because it deals with the characteristics of all human beings as such, regardless of their time, place, personality, and role in society. Because it is the most universal, it also has the least to say. Depending on whom you ask, this level will usually only include certain appetites, physical vulnerabilities, and capacities to choose one or another course of action. It will tell us little if anything about better or worse ways of living. If you want to downplay differences among people and take nothing for granted, this is the most useful level. If you are aiming for something more substantial, it will be of no help.

Slicing up our experience in this way helps shed light on what was really going on in all the cosmopolitan moments described so far. In a first-order universalism, the centre of gravity shifts away from blind adherence to age-old practices and toward propositions that are considered true. They are true because they support the development of worthy types of character found on the level of the ethoses. One prays in a certain way to draw closer to God, or one reads certain classical texts to become more virtuous. In a mature civilisation, practices, propositions, and ethoses interlock in a coherent whole: *Romanitas*, mediæval Catholicism, Sunni Islam, neo-Confucianism, and so on. In a second-order universalism, these layers still interlock in much the same way, but now newcomers are expected to be able to appreciate them. All human beings are called to Civilisation.

The breakthrough to a third-order universalism (see [Table 7.2](#)) gets much more complicated. Here we have two or more distinct civilisations—complexes of practices, propositions, and ethoses—meeting one another and trying to find a basis for mutual respect. Usually the people involved will start by thinking about how the different layers within their own civilisations relate. The more sophisticated they are, the more likely they are to see that the ethoses can crystallise in different ways. A gentleman might be a Thomist or a Confucian, as circumstance dictated or as his conscience urged him, but he would still be a gentleman and recognisable as such. Or one might be a Sufi or an Upanishadic mystic, but still a mystic, and recognisable as such. Propositions might be

signposts to a common ethos, or building blocks for dialogue. Either way, whichever ethos the two sides share in common would be the focal point. A third-order universalism stops at mutual respect of this kind.

Finally, a fourth-order universalism (Table 7.3) pushes even further. It takes some level of mutual respect for granted, but it also hopes to merge the best of all civilisations. The whole would be greater than the sum of its parts. This is what creative figures such as Ricci and Abū'l-Faʒl were trying to do. They found common ground at the level of the ethoses, and on that basis they could have serious conversations about propositions. They might hope to import or export certain propositions from one civilisation into another, as with the conversion of some Confucians to Christianity. Or they might seek to pierce through to an 'unencrusted' universal truth beneath all traditions, as in the 'Ibādat Khāna debates.

We can also see here why the anti-cosmopolitans, such as Maigrot and Badā'ūnī and some of the Chinese Buddhists, objected to such an enterprise. They felt that the layers of each civilisation should not be separated (Table 7.4). Practices and propositions, along with the ethoses they supported in each civilisation, hung together and were valued not only as correct but also as coherent. One could not be a faithful Christian, or a faithful Muslim, or a loyal Chinese, without the whole package. For the anti-cosmopolitans, introducing outside practices or pretending that propositions from different traditions were really the same was merely sloppy thinking. Ethoses might exist further down, and they might justify some mutual respect, but they were hardly the core of a tradition and could not replace it.

Table 7.2 Third-order universalism

| | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Civilisation A</i> | <i>Civilisation B</i> |
| <i>(practices)</i> | <i>(practices)</i> |
| <i>(propositions)</i> | <i>(propositions)</i> |
| <i>ethos</i> | |

Table 7.3 Fourth-order universalism

| | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Civilisation A</i> | <i>Civilisation B</i> |
| <i>(practices)</i> | <i>(practices)</i> |
| <i>propositions →</i> | <i>← propositions</i> |
| <i>ethos</i> | |

Table 7.4 Anti-cosmopolitanism

| | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Civilisation A</i> | <i>Civilisation B</i> |
| <i>practices</i> | <i>practices</i> |
| <i>propositions</i> | <i>propositions</i> |
| <i>(ethos)</i> | |

Viewed in this light, the clash of cosmopolitans and anti-cosmopolitans in the late 1500s was about much more than how openminded or how xenophobic one wanted to be. It had to do with disagreements about the nature of traditions, and how the way a person adhered to a tradition would shape the prospect of leading a fulfilled life.

Modern anthropology and psychology have something to offer here, even though at first glance they are dealing with something quite different. According to anthropologists, much of any culture is made up of ‘implicit meanings’. People in that culture take for granted some habits of mind about propriety, roles, cleanliness, fear, and so on. Mary Douglas, a prominent anthropologist who worked extensively in the Congo, observed, ‘What is actually said in words is only the tip of the iceberg.’ Such ‘submerged ideas’ lubricate social interaction and allow a greater ‘speed of clue-reading’.⁴² The psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut adds a further insight. He distinguishes between ‘experience-near’ and ‘experience-distant’ concepts. People within a culture have ‘experience-near’ concepts such as fear or wickedness. The language they use is common only to those who share their own horizon. Outsiders or those who want a bird’s-eye view of what is happening might have quite another vocabulary for describing the same thing. For a scientist, fear might become a ‘phobia’. For a theologian, a villager’s vague sense of wickedness might become a specific ‘sin’. ‘Experience-distant’ concepts might easily turn into a sea of abstractions distant from daily life. But they are also the only way to express what is going on in a way that transcends any specific culture’s ‘mental horizons’.⁴³

Ultimately, these perspectives come down to how one relates to one’s tradition, how one turns the insider’s view into an outsider’s view, and even how one breaks down the insider/outsider contrast altogether. This is what our cosmopolitans in history were trying to do in their own way. They wanted to bring the essence of each tradition to the surface, so to speak, and put aside many of its placebound entanglements. If Christianity was true, then it could be adopted by a Confucian. Rituals and symbols could be adapted around it. If all

religions came from mystical inspiration, then truth was obscured by the petty ravings of the orthodox. And if making these arguments meant challenging age-old language and offending people—by saying that a tradition was not what it seemed to be, or that the infidels were not really infidels—then so be it. Language was just a means to an end, anyway.

These premodern cosmopolitans were hardly typical personalities. They were most likely to be people such as the Jesuits, the most elevated Confucian scholar-officials, ‘aristocrats to their fingertips’ such as Abū’l-Faḏl, and so on. They already had a sophisticated grasp of their own traditions and were attuned to the layers of meaning within them. They sensed that some habits really were just crystallisations of truth rather than truth itself. They also had a tremendous self-confidence, feeling that they had to prove nothing to anyone in their own societies. They were curious and prepared to take risks to reach out. And they could recognise, sometimes after thinking it through and sometimes just intuitively, kindred spirits from other parts of the world. From their own standpoint, such conclusions followed naturally for anyone discerning and confident enough to see through prejudices. To their critics, the whole enterprise was just a mash-up of arrogance and fuzzy thinking.

We really have four different sorts of people at such moments, then. We have the *deep cosmopolitans* such as Ricci and Abū’l-Faḏl, who wanted to carry on an enlightened conversation across civilisations. They tended to come from rarefied levels of their own societies. After them, we have the *civilisationists*, who were often very erudite but who thought the coherence of each tradition and the boundaries among traditions mattered more. More widespread than either the deep cosmopolitans or the civilisationists were ordinary lay people, split into two camps. One camp, the *faithful*, more or less accepted the tradition into which they were born. Lacking much contact with outsiders, they thought either in terms of a first-order universalism—their tradition was true, and that was all there was to know—or in terms of keeping familiar customs. The other camp was the *convertibles*, like those evangelised by the Dominicans. They had little stake in their tradition of origin because they sat at the bottom of that society. They could embrace a new tradition without losing status or needing to dwell on anything deeper than the two traditions might share. Given a change of circumstance and new contacts, of course, the faithful could become convertibles since the two were often socially indistinguishable.

Encounters such as those in the late 1500s were the most sophisticated we have seen yet. They reflected the developments that had unfolded within each

civilisation over the centuries and a sincere curiosity among people in the right place at the right time. Crucially, they also happened in a setting where power and interests were not so obviously at stake. When Ricci and Yang Tingyun talked about religion and philosophy, they were not representing geopolitical adversaries. Nothing that came out of their conversations was going to affect a balance of power or the security of a state. Europe and China were distant enough, and equal enough, for the conversation to be about something more than Europe versus China.

Nothing is ever perfect, of course, but these experiments were about as close to reasoned dialogue as one was likely to get at the time. Regrettably, they were also the fullest realisation of deep cosmopolitanism before modern history veered off in a very different direction.



The Rhodes Colossus: caricature of Cecil John Rhodes after he announced plans for a telegraph line and railroad from Cape Town to Cairo. Edward Linley Sambourne, 1892.

8 Modernity's Derailments

Having got to this point in world history, we can now look back and take stock of the trajectory I have traced so far. *Deep cosmopolitanism* ran as a common thread through all the major civilisations of the ancient and mediæval world. But think back also to the opening of this book, where I observed what cosmopolitanism has come to mean today. When liberal and postmodern cosmopolitans wax poetic about globalisation and encounters among cultures, they often seem to think they are the only people to have done so and that they are on to something new. To be sure, they may mention some networks of trade and the like from centuries ago, but those strands of the past matter mainly as a foreshadowing and even legitimisation of modern globalisation. For liberal cosmopolitans, most of the past is decidedly non-cosmopolitan. The great civilisations of yesteryear are usually depicted as dens of insularity, arrogance, and persecution.

That there was a fair amount of insularity, arrogance, and persecution, I do not deny. There is a grain of truth in everything. I have already noted many instances where the self-confidence of these civilisations hardly brought out the best in human nature. But it is simply wrong to say that world history only offers one cosmopolitanism of a liberal flavour. Having traced this trajectory over more than two thousand years, we can see that deep cosmopolitanism was an ever-present tendency as well. It had its own logic quite unlike that of modern liberalism. And it was practised by people who had nothing in common with the enthusiasts of today's style of globalisation.

The trajectory also suggests that deep cosmopolitanism was getting stronger and much more sophisticated as the centuries rolled on. First-order universalisms gave way to second and sometimes to third-order universalisms. We even have hints of a fourth-order universalism in fleeting moments here and there. Each advance dug down a bit deeper into the meaning of each tradition and found more reasons to imagine common ground across civilisations. The trajectory

zigzagged a lot, to be sure. Alexander the Great was ahead of the Roman empire in spirit even if not chronologically. There were also many influential people who wanted to push each civilisation back towards insularity and often succeeded in doing so for a time. But despite the zigzags, the direction overall was toward a deeper and more far-ranging cosmopolitanism. By the 1500s, the idea of a world civilisation that merged the best of the regional civilisations was more imaginable than ever before.

When did this trajectory stop? It certainly did not end with the late 1500s, even though I chose those two instances because they were especially rich and revealing. Well into the 1700s, this deep cosmopolitan pattern of thinking crops up a lot. The German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, for example, took great interest in comparing the Bible and the Confucian classics. He believed that just as all human beings had one origin, so did all religious traditions and languages branch off from something primordial. He and some of his contemporaries hoped to discover the original human language, which would reflect more honestly the first knowledge of God.¹

In 1779, the German dramatist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing wrote a play called *Nathan the Wise*. Set in Palestine in the Middle Ages, it brings together a Christian, a Jew, and a Muslim. In one conversation, they get into a parable about a ring that can make its wearer virtuous and godly. A father promises the ring to all three of his sons and then has two replicas made. After his death, none of the sons knows which is the original ring. A judge tells them that there is no way to know, so they should try to live as best they can to show, through the character of each, who wears the real one.² The play followed in the ecumenical tradition of many of the deep cosmopolitans, and became one of the most well known metaphors for tolerance among religions. Significantly, though, it did not descend to the level of bedrock humanity—suspending judgement altogether—to make its case. It took truth for granted. It just called for humility about who possessed it and how it would be known.

Given how long this trajectory of deep cosmopolitanism lasted and how far it got, we come to an obvious question—perhaps the biggest unasked question of the modern age. What derailed it?

It helps to separate long-term reasons from more abrupt changes. Some forces within the old civilisations might have slowed down the process anyway. Over the two thousand years or so from the Axial Age to early modernity, creativity had ebbed and flowed. Civilisations rose and fell and went through periods of stagnation and renaissance. The horizon-broadening impulses of the

cosmopolitans in the 1500s might have run out of momentum if their civilisations had stagnated again. A hard backlash from the anti-cosmopolitans might have prevented things getting much further. There is also some evidence of a flattening trend within some civilisations. India between 1000 and 1500 saw a ‘decisive turn away from Sanskrit’, with more literature emerging in popular regional languages.³ In Europe after 1500, the Protestant Reformation weakened the clergy and shifted the centre of gravity towards austere popular faith. There was no guarantee, therefore, that the ranks of people such as Ricci and Abū’l-Faẓl would have grown over time. Indeed, some of the turn to insular orthodoxy in the 1600s and 1700s suggested a move away from their aspirations.

Still, all these possible interruptions of the cosmopolitan trajectory would have been just that—interruptions. They would not permanently have changed the character of these civilisations. We have every reason to imagine that the trajectory would have regained momentum sooner or later. Something much more fundamental must have happened in the late 1700s and early to mid-1800s to stop it.

One obvious factor was the industrial revolution. Steam engines meant the derailment of deep cosmopolitanism, so to speak. The industrial revolution mattered for two reasons, one internal to civilisations—first Europe and then the others, one by one—and the other more global. Most social scientists trying to explain the rise of modern nationalism say that industrialisation had much to do with it. Benedict Anderson, for example, argues that the nation as an ‘imagined community’ was quite novel in both scale and content. It was much bigger than kinship societies and folk cultures. It also had a different logic from that of loyalty to a ruling dynasty or the large-scale religious universalisms of Christendom and Islam. According to Anderson, the emergence of ‘print capitalism’ was key. Mass-produced printed books meant the standardisation of national languages, which replaced cross-cultural sacred languages such as Latin. Print capitalism centralised power within each country around the capital region with a more or less ‘standard’ dialect. It also created a national public sphere that defined the modern state.⁴

Ernest Gellner offers an argument parallel to that of Anderson. He says that modern nation-states have a scale and type of identity unprecedented in history. The old agrarian societies had a tiny layer of educated people—clerics and aristocrats—spanning large territories. Beneath them were fragmented subcultures of peasants and artisans, with local dialects that faded messily into one another. The industrial economies that emerged in the early 1800s needed

trained workers who could move around on a large scale and still understand one another. Only modern national governments could afford to provide mass education of that sort. Pupils imbibed nationalism at their school desks. Modern citizens' identities coalesced around the nation-state, with a stamped sameness within and little sense of anything larger beyond it.⁵

For Anderson, the driving force behind nationalism was the market and national reading publics. For Gellner, it was the state's need to educate a labour force. Either way, the breakup of civilisational loyalties into rather more pedestrian nationalisms was driven by technology and capitalism. There is probably much truth in this account. Whether things had to turn out that way, however, is rather less clear. After all, some modern technologies might have been integrated smoothly into a world still organised along civilisational lines. Perhaps more important than the technology itself was the shift of power within society. Simply put, modern capitalism displaced the most influential classes of the old civilisations and empowered new types of people with a starkly different mentality. The so-called bourgeoisie—the industrialists, the bankers, and the new middle-class specialists—were not inherently nationalistic. Many of them had far-reaching interests around the globe. But whatever the scale of their preoccupations, they were hardly carriers of the old civilisational values. They were neither gentlemen nor mystics. They knew only the new, hard truths of supply and demand and the Faustian urge to wring prosperity from the world. Theirs was not a universalism of the first, second, third, or fourth orders. It was grounded on the simplest bedrock human nature, with its wont to produce and consume.

Modernisation along that track would have been enough to weaken the old high cultures even if it had only happened separately within each civilisation. Yet many of its effects on cosmopolitan thinking only made themselves felt in the relationship among civilisations, or what was left of them. As many world historians have noted, industrial takeoff was also one of the great upsurges in contact among cultures. In the nineteenth century, trade volumes swelled, telegraph cables were laid, and millions of migrant workers boarded steamers for other continents.⁶

This intensification of contact was of a wholly different order of magnitude from the somewhat marginal and experimental encounters of the deep cosmopolitans in centuries past. For all its scale, however, nineteenth-century globalisation did little to advance cosmopolitan thinking. Apart from the sort of people pushing it, this was largely because it happened on such unequal terrain.

All earlier cosmopolitan moments, except for the conquest of the Americas in the 1500s, had happened among roughly equal parties. All the four Eurasian civilisations had similar technology and resources, and distance often protected them from one another as well. The modern era, by contrast, saw huge inequality between Europe and the rest. Backed by the might of modern industry, first merchant adventurers came and then armies from Europe smashed into the Middle East, India, China, and Africa. The Mughal dynasty met its end after Britain put down the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny and named Queen Victoria as Empress of India. China was forced open from the 1840s onward, with the Opium Wars extracting territorial leases and extraterritorial immunities for Europeans. Africa was carved up on a conference table in Berlin. By the beginning of the twentieth century, nearly four-fifths of the world was ruled by European powers. Cecil Rhodes, the mastermind of British expansion in southern Africa, remarked in 1902 in truly Alexandrian fashion that ‘I would annex the planets if I could; I often think of that. It makes me sad to see them so clear and yet so far.’

This lopsided world also shaped how people thought about themselves and the relative worth of civilisations. In one of his more famous quotes, Rhodes urged his compatriots to ‘Remember that you are an Englishman, and have consequently won first prize in the lottery of life.’ Flows of ideas, no matter how inspired, were now tainted by a painful consciousness of power. Take missionaries in China in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth. Where the Jesuits earlier had trodden lightly and taken Confucianism seriously, missionaries now were attached to a ‘gospel of power’, discredited by their ties to commerce and imperialism.⁷ God was riding in on a gunboat.

This unease cut in all directions. Much of the colonial literature of the early twentieth century reflects the awkwardness of unequals dealing with each other. In E M Forster’s 1924 novel *A Passage to India*, the young British colonial officer informs his visiting mother of the proper protocol: ‘You are superior to everyone in India, except for a few maharanis, who are equal.’ Later in the same novel, we encounter a painful moment in which an upwardly mobile Muslim doctor ends up sitting in a lounge with several of the British expatriates. He tries rather too hard to seem at ease and among equals, but never quite convinces himself and ends up leaving in a hurry. George Orwell’s famous short essay, ‘On Shooting an Elephant’, tells of a district officer in Burma who is suddenly called on to shoot a marauding elephant on the loose. As he lies on the ground taking aim, he feels he is in the middle of a spectacle. All Burmese eyes in the village are on him, as a representative of European authority.⁸

Quite apart from the real suffering often experienced under colonial rule, this inequality also disrupted any cosmopolitan aspirations among non-European peoples. Under pressure from outside and sensing a struggle for survival, Chinese intellectuals by the early 1900s had abandoned their old cultural universalism. Since there was no hope of the new barbarians being assimilated—they would not even acknowledge much of value in Chinese civilisation—it was hard to feel that China offered something to the world. Culturalism gave way to nationalism. Chineseness would have to be redefined. To be Chinese would not mean to uphold certain timeless values. It would mean to belong to the Han race, in fierce competition with other races. Indeed, if the more genteel and humane aspects of Confucianism got in the way of racial self-strengthening and catching up with the West, then Confucianism would have to go.⁹

Of course, some Chinese in coastal cities such as Shanghai did feel that they were part of a global culture. But that global culture was not a space for meeting and combining the best of different worlds. Instead, it was a global culture centred on the West, to be adopted wholesale by those seeking some superficial trappings of prestige. As one Chinese satirical dramatist of the 1930s put it, such people were ‘something half-baked or not altogether ripe’. Regarding one short story character, a doctor recently returned from Harvard, he remarked, ‘He wasn’t *wearing* foreign clothes; he looked more like he had committed himself, under oath, to foreign clothes.’¹⁰ Just as the spread of some earlier civilisations had been helped by wealth and force of arms, this new West-centred global culture was now spreading across the world. But it was utterly unlike anything that had gone before. It was an infatuation with consumerism and more or less at war with the past. Indeed, astute observers outside Europe sensed as much even in the very early stages. A memorandum at the Ottoman court in 1798 commented on the secular ideology of the French Revolution. While Christendom before had been a territorial nuisance but not an existential threat to Islam, this new threat could be much more dangerous. It aimed to appeal directly to individual Muslims with ‘insults and vilification against the pure prophets and great kings, [calling for] the removal and abolition of all religion’.¹¹

Not only did the vast inequality between civilisations discourage cosmopolitan aspirations. It also favoured a new and more pernicious understanding of the human race. All previous civilisations had taken for granted, alongside their own centrality, the basic sameness of human nature everywhere. Human nature might not be fulfilled without civilisation, but it was universal in itself. In a masterful history of anthropological thought, Margaret

Hodgen notes a crucial shift in thinking in the 1700s and 1800s. While it would have been heresy to do so earlier, some secular European thinkers began suggesting that ‘savages’ and other distant peoples were not fully human, or at least that they lacked certain capacities. And they were not merely degenerate beings because of unusual sinfulness—perhaps as descendants of Cain or Ham—or long isolation from the true faith. They were racially inferior, ranked down an evolutionary hierarchy with Europeans at the top.¹² The wider the gap between Europe and the rest of the world, the more this racist manner of thinking solidified. It was thus much harder by the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth for a European—even one of Christian and universalist bent—to see distant others as fully part of the same human project. And knowing that so many Europeans disdained them, it was only natural that other peoples such as the Chinese should fall into the same trap of an obsession with racial competition.

All these factors—the rise of capitalism, the tainting of ideas by global hierarchies, and the fragmenting of human unity—combined to bury deep cosmopolitanism. But exactly how they interlocked with one another requires careful reflexion. It has to do with how we make sense of what went wrong and how it might have gone right instead.

To be sure, one need not be a deep cosmopolitan of the old sort to lament the rise of racist global hierarchies. Liberal cosmopolitans today also lament such things; indeed, race is one of their perennial preoccupations. But they tend to diagnose the problem differently. They assume the old civilisations were already so intolerant that modern racism was a natural continuation, rather than something in many ways new. I have already shown all the reasons why we should reject that assumption. Yet even when liberal cosmopolitans do admit that modern racism was something new, they flip the issue on its head. They trace everything back to eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe’s desire to impose its own supremacy on the rest of the world. In effect, they say that the problem was European universalism. If so, then the solution must lie in more relativism and more letting alone of other civilisations.

What the liberal cosmopolitans ignore in their diagnosis is that behind Europe’s imperial expansion and its industrial hubris lay a profound change within European society itself. The classes in power by the late nineteenth century had largely displaced the bearers of traditional high culture. They were a new breed altogether. The old civilisationists, for all their other drawbacks, were generally not racists because their religious universalism would not allow it. The

new bourgeoisie may not have been inherently racist, but a Darwinian struggle for wealth and power, both within and across societies, came naturally to it. When one weakens the old civilisational universalisms, one loses much of the moral language for binding humanity together.

From a liberal cosmopolitan vantage point, this historical reality is rather uncomfortable. The nineteenth-century bourgeoisie is perhaps a little too close to home, for one thing. Those who used imperial force to open world markets over a hundred years ago are in some sense the spiritual ancestors of today's globalisation of concrete, glass, and neon. Indeed, it is hard to imagine the liberal version of today's 'global village' having come about any other way than via some combination of huckstering and gunboats. Once one rules out some sort of intercivilisational synthesis, no other mechanism remains. To put things this way crashes head-on against the prevailing liberal cosmopolitan version of history. In effect, we see that one of the modern problems most loathed by liberals, racism, is a product of the modern breakthrough. We also recall that the allegedly intolerant older civilisations, if looked at more closely, were in fact less race-conscious than the first generations of modernisers. The modernisers' hard-edged view of global hierarchy has worn off in recent generations, to be sure, but the damage inflicted in the nineteenth century is hard to ignore.

So far I have traced how the promising trajectory of deep cosmopolitanism was cut off in modernity. Any time such promise is frustrated, one has to ask whether it could have been otherwise. Clearly, the trajectory could have continued only if the old high cultures had not been displaced by modern capitalism. Technological development was one thing, and perhaps could have been reconciled with a continuity of civilisation. Any rise of something like the bourgeoisie—in Europe or elsewhere, for that matter—would have led to more or less what we have seen over the last century-and-a-half. But if the old high cultures had continued, what would a true breakthrough to fourth-order universalism have looked like?

We might imagine a few scenarios building on what was happening in the late 1500s but going further. Flights of fancy can sometimes be suggestive. Imagine that significant chunks of the Ming elite had converted to Catholicism, while retaining Confucian social ethics the same way that educated late Romans had combined the faith with classical ideals. Imagine that the Habsburgs had consolidated their empire in Europe, the Americas, and the Philippines. Imagine that the European and Chinese ruling classes had then intermarried, with Europeanisation and Sinicisation flowing easily in both directions. This new

elite would have presided over a majority of the world's population. Imagine that at the same time, the Mughal and Ottoman empires had merged atop a multicultural and relatively pluralistic Muslim–Hindu zone, amounting to another third or more of humanity. Imagine that, in the spirit of people such as Ricci and Abū'l-Faʿl, all these currents in Eurasia had converged further, with a century or two of encouragement by well disposed rulers and intellectual elites. And, finally, imagine that the breakthroughs in transport and communication had happened on this stage, binding these civilisations together more tightly and accelerating their engagement with one another. By the nineteenth century, we might have been heading into a diverse but ever more unified world civilisation.

Or there might have been even later branching-off points. Perhaps the trajectory could have been deflected even after the rise of modern Europe. Some elements of the old high cultures persisted into the modern era. Even in the late nineteenth century, much of the old European aristocracy maintained an outlook more civilisational than national. A figure such as the Catholic intellectual Lord Acton, for example, identified with pan-European unity and argued that diverse multinational empires were the environment most congenial to liberty.¹³ Such people were no longer the mainstream of elite opinion, of course. Governments also played to the gallery of popular nationalism, as their empire-building amounted to a grab of territory for its own sake. At the margins, though, some of the older civilisational outlook survived among the sort of people who went into the colonial services of the European empires. Perhaps it was merely personal eccentricity and the conceit of trying to recreate Rome in the tropics. Yet once those empires governed most of the world, say around 1900, could anything have been done differently to rescue deep cosmopolitanism?

One striking feature of all the major European empires of the early twentieth century is their cultural diversity. The old phrase 'the empire on which the sun never sets' could apply in 1900 to the British, French, and Dutch empires literally, and with a bit of a stretch to the German and Portuguese as well. Each of them had possessions on multiple continents and ruled over diverse peoples, even though their power centres were in Europe. In due course, over about three decades after the Second World War, these empires would break up into a multitude of independent states. From today's vantage point, decolonisation looks inevitable. Both colonisers and colonised bought into its assumptions sooner or later. Many African and Asian nationalists, themselves hard-edged modernisers, made independence their sole issue to whip up their peoples. Whether independence would bring juster and more decent societies was often

beside the point. Many independence activists flattered themselves that ordinary people's fondest hope was merely to be ruled by strongmen of their own race. In any case, sooner or later, European governments came to acknowledge the inevitability of empire's end. Thus was the sentiment with which, for instance, British prime minister Harold Macmillan gave his 'Wind of Change' speech in 1960, promising a swift withdrawal from Africa.

Nationalism may not have been the wisest choice in the long run, however. The size of the European empires suggests a path not taken, a path that could have led to equality and dignity but without the drawbacks. Why could the empires not have stayed intact as equal partnerships of the diverse peoples within them? This may seem far-fetched from today's vantage point, but it might not have been impossible had different choices been made.

To realise that cosmopolitan alternative would have meant navigating some delicate issues. Redesigners of empire would have had to craft new institutions to span several continents, quite apart from tackling the mentality of the people involved. One half-hearted move to change the structure of the British empire and prevent its eventual breakup was the late nineteenth-century proposal of an 'Imperial Federation'. One pamphlet published by the Imperial Federation League in Australia laid out how it would work. Its author, Edward E Morris, called for creating an imperial parliament with representatives from Britain and from all the newly self-governing dominions. The federation would handle defence and foreign policy, spreading the costs among the dominions. Symbolically, they would share an allegiance to the monarchy. Other policy matters would be reserved to their separate legislatures. In Morris's view, this arrangement would blend the best of small and large states: democratic self-government on local issues, and the weight to compete globally with such countries as America and Russia. Enthusiasts of a common imperial citizenship thought this great cosmopolitan experiment would hark back to the *imperium et libertas* of ancient Rome. One of them urged his readers to 'imagine Commissioners of the India Civil Service holding examinations in Melbourne and Cape Town to fill the Service of a Viceroy born in Quebec'.¹⁴

At first glance, the proposal for a multicontinental federation was straightforward enough. Yet its supporters rather neglected the Asian elephant in the room. Morris himself limited the federation to the so-called 'white dominions', those territories already self-governing and peopled largely by European settlers, such as Australia and Canada. India could not be included because it was not ready for self-government. At most, the empire would be

bifurcated: an imperial federation of Britain and its offshoots on the one hand, and a supervised agglomeration of India and the other dependent colonies on the other, as the junior partners. Historians of the British empire point to countless instances in which, despite some abstract ideas that all subjects were equal before the law, racial hierarchy permeated policies on the ground. Australia and Canada mightily resisted the most difficult implication of a common British subjecthood: that it would let Indian migrants travel freely to their shores. They resorted to all sorts of legal subterfuge to thwart it.¹⁵

Without a true common citizenship across all their peoples—not just among their settler diasporas—none of these empires could, or frankly should, have survived. Despite obvious patterns of discrimination, however, there were a few countervailing tendencies. Among European empires, the Portuguese and the French were ostensibly the most race-blind. The Brazilian historian Gilberto Freyre, writing between the 1930s and the 1950s, coined the term ‘Lusotropicalism’ to describe what he saw as peculiarities of Portuguese colonialism. Over five centuries, he argued, the Portuguese had been remarkably open to intermarriage everywhere, from Brazil to Africa to India, and to accepting as fully Portuguese anyone who assimilated enough in language and education. According to Freyre, this tolerance could be traced back to Portugal’s own mixture of Iberian, Arab, and Jewish influences in the late Middle Ages and to the fact that its tiny population meant it could never overwhelm the colonised with an influx of settlers. This supposed race-blindness was appropriated for a while by the Portuguese government in the 1960s as it justified fighting to keep its overseas territories as integral parts of one ‘pluricontinental’ state.¹⁶

Likewise, French imperialism included a ‘civilising mission’ in which anyone could become French. ‘Our ancestors, the Gauls’, intoned African children as they read from French textbooks. The first African representative in the French National Assembly, Blaise Diagne, was elected in 1914 from Senegal. In the years immediately after the Second World War, Africans became a regular sight in the halls of power in Paris. Nevertheless, the hope to hold on to empire by making it more inclusive ultimately failed in both Portugal and France. They, too, had to yield to the ‘wind of change’, in no small measure because despite such superficial gestures of inclusion, they never quite overcame a disdain for their overseas subjects. At worst, race-blindness was a fiction that the spokesmen of empire would use to pretend, as long as they could, that problems did not exist. At best, it was a distant ideal that failed to bring concrete progress before the patience of the colonised ran out.

That the ideal existed at all, however, does suggest that there was some room to push it further, if the right constellation of interests and imagination had aligned. Even in unlikely places, European racism was more permeable than it might have looked. After Germany, Britain was perhaps the least likely of European empires to imagine that the colonised could become British by assimilation. But to whom this fact mattered and how was more complicated than we might expect. Take Dadabhai Naoroji, a Parsi who rose to become a professor of mathematics in Mumbai. He then moved to England first to set up a business and then to teach Gujarati at University College London. In 1892, an overwhelmingly white constituency in north London elected him as the first Asian Member of Parliament. He took his oath on the sacred text of the Parsis, the Khordeh Avesta, rather than the Bible. While in Parliament, he saw himself as representing both British and Indian constituencies, and often tried to appeal past British colonial policy to British principles of fairness. A few years earlier, the then prime minister, Lord Salisbury, had mentioned him contemptuously as ‘a black man’. A storm of debate burst forth in the British press, much of it defending Naoroji’s impeccable credentials as an anglicised gentleman.¹⁷ Figures such as Naoroji were exceptions, to be sure, but if boundaries were already somewhat permeable then perhaps they could have been made more so over time.

The European empires could have evolved in two directions, therefore. They could have fragmented into a hundred nationalisms, as they did; or they could have become more genuinely cosmopolitan. Indeed, there is every reason to think that the latter scenario could have proved more feasible over time. Take one of the most important cultural relationships, that between Britain and India. Some promising strands of cosmopolitan thinking emerged in the decades leading up to India’s partition and independence, even though they ran counter to the spirit of the times. Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali poet, 1913 Nobel Prize winner in literature, and critic of modernity, was an avowed cosmopolitan. He looked askance at the younger generation of Indian nationalists, because he rightly suspected that they wanted a European-style secularism and rampant industrialisation once they came into power. While critical of the West, he did not want independence at all costs; he wanted the best of all civilisations, which was quite different from what the modernisers celebrated. The militant nationalists reciprocated. They mocked him, and his defence of the old Indian spirituality, as backward and effete.¹⁸

Cosmopolitanism ran eastward as well as westward. There was more openness

to Indian civilisation on the part of some educated Englishmen than we might now remember. None other than Enoch Powell, who as a member of Parliament would become known in the 1960s for his 'Rivers of Blood' speech against the social problems caused by immigration, was deeply interested in India as a young man. After excelling in the Greek and Latin classics at Cambridge in the early 1930s, he taught in Australia for a while but hoped eventually to become the Viceroy of India. Over his lifetime he learned twelve languages including Urdu. In 1946, Powell had just returned from the war to work for the Conservative Party Secretariat. In his 'Memorandum on Indian Policy', he argued against the growing momentum toward Indian independence. The alternative was 'the hope of a lasting union between "white" and "coloured" which the conception of a common subjectship to the King-Emperor affords and to which the development of the Empire hitherto has given the prospect of leading'.¹⁹

What if there had been more Enoch Powells and more Rabindranath Tagores at mid-century as the point of decision came? Decades after the Imperial Federation League had insisted that India could not be included on an equal footing, there were at least glimmers of hope that it might be. To entertain this thought hardly means pretending that it would have been an easy proposition. To extend these limited cosmopolitan impulses and hopes for fair play would have required transforming, in profound ways, both the constitutional machinery of empire and the mentalities of both colonisers and colonised. Can we imagine, for example, a British Empire in 1980 with a truly multiracial Imperial Parliament, and perhaps a Westminster Abbey wedding of Prince Charles to the daughter of a maharaja? The mere size of India posed a structural problem. A federation of the white dominions would have been manageable enough given their relative sizes. Demographically, Britain itself would gradually have shrunk to be still the largest member state, but well short of a majority. India, however, would have dwarfed the rest of the empire put together. The centre of gravity in an intact British empire would have shifted to Asia sooner or later. For all his genuine respect for Indian civilisation, someone such as Powell would hardly have accepted something so unbalanced.

The demographic problem might not have been insurmountable, however. To see why, let us turn to the deeper issue of entrenched identities. Any multicontinental polity hoping to survive intact would have had to move audaciously in a post-racial direction. It would have had to abolish all discriminatory treatment of its citizens, not merely for the odd exception of the

university educated, politically engaged, or culturally distinguished. Perhaps more fundamentally, it would also have had to flesh out its common citizenship with real content. This would have meant taking seriously the substance of the various traditions. For Britain and India, it would have meant the sort of conversation that thinkers such as Tagore wanted, about how the best of the old civilisations together could push back against modern excess. In the case of the French empire, it would have meant finding common ground among, say, a Provençal Catholic, a Senegalese Muslim, and a Cambodian Buddhist.

Any such decentred empire would have had to rest on something much more substantial than a willingness to live together with the diverse peoples that history had thrown together under one sovereignty. It would have needed much more than just an oath of allegiance to one king-emperor, or the slogan of 'liberté, égalité, fraternité'. Instead, such reimagined empires would have had to win loyalty by standing for human virtues that transcended place and culture. People would need a reason to live together, not just acknowledgement of the fact they were forced to live together. In short, they would have had to relearn what the deep cosmopolitans of the late 1500s were trying to do.

If deep cosmopolitanism had animated such a twentieth-century political experiment, what might it have turned into next? It would have been but a small step from a few multiethnic world empires to one consolidated world state. Their postracialist, cosmopolitan political cultures would have mirrored each other enough, in all likelihood, to be easily brought into tighter cooperation and eventual union. The small number of units involved would be far more manageable than the nearly two hundred often dysfunctional independent states with which we have ended up instead. And, not least, the demographic problem would solve itself. If people such as Powell would have found a democratic British empire too lopsidedly Indian, then the obvious solution would have been to move things up a level. Globally, there really would be a rough equality with no centre, because no one would be in the majority. In a cosmopolitan world state, moreover, Indians would have been unlikely to vote simply as Indians, whatever the paranoid might have expected that to mean.

Here our flight of fancy has to stop. The second half of the twentieth century turned out quite differently. Once India went its own way, Powell fell back into an insular sort of nationalism. He gained infamy for his 1968 speech urging the repatriation of African and Asian immigrants. One of the empire's more cosmopolitan intellectuals became, tragically, one of post-imperial Britain's more xenophobic politicians. And the younger generation rising in the 1960s did

no better on the whole. Had the empires taken a cosmopolitan turn, their idealism might have focused on taking diverse traditions seriously and realising the promise of justice for many peoples living under one umbrella. Instead, the younger generation's energy largely petered out in the libertine self-indulgence of the counterculture, followed in the 1980s by fevered moneymaking.

If the deep cosmopolitans of the ancient and mediæval periods had peered ahead to the twentieth century, they no doubt would have seen a rather disheartening dénouement. Europe's industrial takeoff had thrown the world off balance and shrunk prospects for a real dialogue among civilisations. The racial hierarchies of the colonial period fragmented the world spiritually, even if steamships and telegraph lines bound it together materially. Later, the unravelling of the European empires closed off one avenue of redemption, namely, the idea—however fanciful it might seem in hindsight—that they could evolve into truly multiracial, multicontinental polities and become the building blocks of world integration. By the second half of the twentieth century, the world order looked like a honeycomb of new tribalisms, overlaid by a layer of lucre-lust. The trajectory of deep cosmopolitanism traced so far in this book had come to a halt. Indeed, it looked as if the hard-won advances of twenty centuries had been sacrificed in less than two.



Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Chinese Chairman Hu Jintao, and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the Brazil–Russia–India–China conference in April 2009. Agência Brasil.

9 Globalisation and New Landscapes of Power

The picture I painted at the end of the last chapter undoubtedly will seem too bleak to many liberals. They will protest that the second half of the twentieth century marked a real breakthrough. Racism slowly declined, and the West could no longer dictate terms to the rest of the world. From a liberal perspective, a world still bound together but less Eurocentric offered a precious opportunity for a new cosmopolitanism, founded neither on the old high cultures nor on force of arms but on a common layer of humanity.

This liberal optimism included an upsurge of idealistic language, in the spirit of the postwar United Nations and human rights frameworks. But it was more than that. Parallel to the new international architecture ran several decades of social churning in which, even within the West, the bearers of new values rose to the top and completed the displacement of the old civilisational elites. Modern societies smashed the old barriers to opportunity and allowed many of the talented to rise more easily than they could have risen in centuries past.

But as a marker of how much the world has changed, the rise of talent may matter less than the image surrounding it and the traits that are now to be celebrated. Consider the changed position of religious and ethnic minorities. We have seen that a number of minorities—Jewish, Muslim, and others—had found ways to slot into the old civilisations. Their experience had ranged from persecution to a *modus vivendi* to assimilation. But as ongoing communities, their worldviews were still more or less recognisable to a deep cosmopolitan, even if in a given setting they might have been on the defensive because of the seemingly eccentric form they took. In the liberal image of modern history, the social churning of the twentieth century was noteworthy in part because it set these groups free from the burdens of marginality. Indeed, marginality has often moved to the centre and become something of a new fashion.

We can see this sort of worldview in a revealing book from a few years ago.

Its author, Yuri Slezkine, has ample cosmopolitan credentials. He is a Russian Jew who started his career abroad as a Portuguese translator in Africa and eventually immigrated to America. His book, *The Jewish Century*, reads the lessons of globalisation directly out of his own people's experience.¹ He divides humanity into two sorts of people, whom he dubs Apollonians and Mercurians. Apollonians have been the warriors and peasants, who are settled on the land and who have a certain austere dignity. Mercurians, in contrast, have been urban, mobile, intellectually astute, and occupationally flexible: the 'rule-breakers, border-crossers, and go-betweens', the 'service nomads', the 'traders among sharers, nomads among peasants, or tribes among nations'. Slezkine says that the Jewish diaspora has been the best example of the Mercurians, though other groups would qualify too. He goes on to argue that people such as the Jews came to punch above their weight in the twentieth century—in everything from commerce to politics to intellectual life—because their knack for navigating the world, honed in more hostile times, especially suits modernity. The Jews did not start modernity as such, and many modern Mercurians are former Apollonians who switched outlooks. But Slezkine says that no one could be better at being modern than those who for centuries had already had to live in a quasi-modern way as 'permanent strangers'.

Slezkine's view of history reveals a tension within liberal cosmopolitanism. On the one hand, as we saw at the beginning of this book with Appiah's idealistic vision of 'the global tribe we have become', it promises emancipation to all human beings. That universal story of progress certainly can encompass the rise of once-persecuted trading diasporas as just another vivid triumph of the underdog over the old civilisations. On the other hand, liberal cosmopolitanism sometimes admits a genealogy of sorts. Slezkine's book exemplifies the view that some identifiable currents of irreverent marginality always ran beneath the surface of the old civilisations and that modernity let them break through at last.

The latter view, of liberal cosmopolitanism as genealogy, has three features worth noting. First, in celebrating a more or less hidden current of history, it eerily mirrors the deep cosmopolitan history I have traced. Neither my deep cosmopolitans nor Slezkine's 'Mercurians' were the mainstream of their often rather insular societies. They were the bearers of unrealised potential, waiting for history to open up an opportunity. Of course, Slezkine and I identify different heroes in the story.

Second, if liberal cosmopolitanism comes out of the experience of trading minorities, as Slezkine says outright and many liberals imply, that would make it

only natural for other people to feel that today's globalisation does not really belong to them. While we do glimpse all races and raiments among the jetsetting investment bankers and media moguls and globe-trotting literati, they are not quite an even cross-section of humanity. The price of finding legitimacy for liberalism in the past might be, ironically, undercutting its legitimacy in the present.

Third, suggesting that trading minorities were the spiritual ancestors of modern liberal cosmopolitanism may run into the problem of the reluctant hero. Most obviously, it might tempt critics of today's juggernaut of concrete, glass, and neon to associate the juggernaut too closely with identifiable and historically vulnerable groups, to whom wicked things sometimes were done. Market-minded diasporas sometimes flourish, and then when their luck runs out the pogroms start. But in a deeper sense, Slezkine's own forebears—and others whom he claims as premodern 'Mercurians'—simply might not recognise themselves in the enthusiasts of modern globalisation. Yes, they were 'permanent strangers' in a sense, as he notes. But there are different sorts of marginality. Being demographically and structurally marginal is not necessarily the same as being spiritually marginal, with a whiff of cynicism toward the great civilisations. While the vanguard of some religious minorities may have seized the opportunity as civilisations unravelled, we should not ignore how far such people abandoned their own premodern traditions in the process. Most of Slezkine's Jews cast off Judaism to become modern; they certainly did not feel much continuity with the rabbis of the past.

Perhaps one should not dwell on the fortunes and self-understandings of a tiny portion of the world's population. Even by the most expansive definition of Slezkine's 'Mercurians', their numbers are limited and their cultural influence may be overstated. But the observations above are a microcosm of much that is at stake in how we see the global landscape today. For it is, in the end, a landscape: uneven terrain on which some stand higher than others and on which the same features seem quite different depending on your vantage point. It is not a bright landscape of emancipation for all. Now that we are long past the peak of Western power, and global society has been churned up both within and across countries, many complex forces are jostling to shape that landscape and stake their own claims. Some work towards various kinds of cosmopolitanism and seek to define the emerging global political space according to their own ideals and interests. Others reject the very idea of a global political space and would prefer to erect defensive walls once again.

One of the most obvious signs of liberal cosmopolitanism today is the gradual consolidation of global institutions. Over the last few decades, and especially since the early 1990s, a whole architecture has arisen to stabilise economic flows and to keep the globalisation juggernaut on course. The foreign policy and financial establishments of the major powers have brought us institutions such as the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Central Bank. Such cross-border organs serve largely to bind national governments into free-market policies. One critic has called this strategy ‘new constitutionalism’, an alliance of corporate interests and technocrats to hem in democracy. Treaties commit national governments to certain trade, monetary, and regulatory arrangements, insulating them from the turbulence of democratic politics.²

These measures are scattered and ad hoc. They do not add up to a single global power centre so much as they represent mechanisms to coordinate policy across countries. Anne-Marie Slaughter, the former Director of Policy Planning for the American State Department, has called this model ‘transgovernmentalism’. While governments remain sovereign, they take specific functions—monetary policy, crime control, environmental regulation, and the like—and professionalise and coordinate them across borders.³ In coming decades, this gradualist approach will most likely continue to spin more webs of global integration. It is the establishment’s version of a cosmopolitan vision for our time. Political globalisation either advances interests that the nation-state hinders or protects interests that the nation-state imperils.

Another cosmopolitan political current flowing through the emerging global landscape is rather at odds with the first one. Some activists and thinkers of left-liberal persuasion, such as the American international law scholar Richard Falk, hope for a ‘globalisation from below’. Rather than seeing global governance as a bulwark against democracy, these idealists want to use it to promote equality and justice. This sort of left-liberal cosmopolitanism starts from the idea that human rights and social justice trump national sovereignty. Its supporters want to strengthen global civil society networks and, eventually, global political institutions. For example, people who face abuse within their own countries would be able to appeal beyond them. Concrete proposals have included ‘universal jurisdiction’ to bring tyrants to justice in courts abroad, and even a democratically elected second chamber of the United Nations. These activists believe that such ‘people-driven’ globalisation is the best counterweight to the lopsided globalisation of business interests now.⁴

The left-liberal cosmopolitans are usually moderate in their goals. Many of them seemingly would be happy recreating midcentury Swedish-style social democracy at the global level. Further to the left are some updated Marxists and world-systems thinkers, who want a worldwide challenge to capitalism. Radical sociologist Christopher Chase-Dunn, for example, urges those fighting for social justice to deepen their cross-border alliances. Eventually, he hopes, those of radical bent will join forces in a 'global party'.⁵ Nothing so formal has arisen yet, of course, though it seems likely that within a few decades those on the left will form strong transnational alliances to match the pro-business networks on the right.

Some self-described liberal or leftist cosmopolitans might bridle at being discussed in the same breath as the networks among governments and high finance. From their perspective, there is bad cosmopolitanism and good cosmopolitanism, and their logics are so far apart as to warrant wholly separate consideration. On one side is the cosmopolitanism of interests, which treats globalisation as an opportunity to escape the pressures of democracy, usually for the sake of making money. On the other side is the cosmopolitanism of ideals and social justice, oriented to concerns such as the environment or poverty relief or protection of the oppressed. Both cosmopolitanisms bypass states, but for the sake of the advantaged or the disadvantaged respectively.

Or so the narrative goes. I do not doubt the idealism of many who imagine a cosmopolitan future that is more just and more responsive to ordinary people. And the establishment and the left-liberal cosmopolitans sometimes do battle with each other on policy questions. Most recently, for example, transatlantic free-trade pact negotiations have had business and political leaders waxing enthusiastic about economic returns, while many activists fear weakening of environmental and food safety standards as well as public health care. There are real differences of priority. Yet advocates of the establishment and left-liberal flavours of modern cosmopolitanism have some crucial points in common. Both aim at emancipating individuals and breaking down boundaries. They differ on whether the market or democracy should define the process and on how the gains should be shared out along the way. But neither has much sympathy for tradition, for they both think they are fighting for the future. They have more in common with each other than either has with any earlier configuration of ideas in history. And, while they might not like to ponder the matter, neither has much support globally, beyond certain swathes of middle-class publics in the West and even more upscale groups elsewhere.

Still, as one very visible part of the emerging global landscape, this current of cosmopolitan thinking does deserve attention. The European Union (EU) is the experiment that has gone the furthest in embodying its aims. It is also something of a Rorschach ink-blot test. All manner of visions get projected on to it. To its supporters, it represents a breakthrough in political order. It has brought peace and economic integration to countries that were at each others' throats for centuries. Despite the challenges of today's fiscal crisis, its citizens enjoy what to earlier generations would look like unparalleled peace, prosperity, and freedom of movement. It is quite an accomplishment, for example, that a Bulgarian can work in Germany and vote in local elections and for the European Parliament. Indeed, a 2013 survey found that the freedom to live anywhere in Europe was the most often mentioned meaning of the EU to average European citizens.⁶

Much like the liberal mainstream, the EU has something of a split personality between its establishment side and its idealist side. On the one hand, it has eased the flow of goods and investment across borders, and harmonised economic and monetary policies to attract transnational business. On the other hand, it has established organs such as the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, to which citizens can appeal for rulings that bind national governments. It is on behalf of this double-edged liberal cosmopolitanism that both centre-right and centre-left have united, time and again, to ram through ratification of the EU's founding treaties. They have come up against opposition from nationalist and populist eurosceptics within the member states. Most recently and vividly, hard-eurosceptic parties such as Britain's UKIP and Greece's Syriza won about a quarter of the vote in the May 2014 EU elections. From the perspective of the nervous EU establishment, such doubts are mere background noise, destined to weaken over time. And in the long run, the demographic trends probably are in favour of the EU continuing. Studies have found that especially among younger and more educated Europeans—though unevenly across countries—enthusiasm is high for an even faster pace of integration, such as devising a common foreign and defence policy.⁷

In world-historical perspective, the broadly liberal version of cosmopolitanism exemplified in the EU is quite atypical. Neither deep cosmopolitans nor more placebound traditionalists would recognise many of its underlying assumptions. Take the attempt to write a formal EU constitution in 2004. The drafters had to navigate a maze of arguments over weighted national voting rights and other technicalities, and the product was eventually rejected in referenda in France and

the Netherlands, even though most of its provisions ended up in a later treaty that did win approval. Quite apart from this inauspicious process, the content of the constitution was revealing. Its framers took for granted that the purpose of any state is merely to advance individual rights, prosperity, a secular public sphere, and so on. They left out of the draft, as potentially divisive, even a passing reference to Christianity as part of Europe's common history and values.⁸ The descent into interest and triviality was perhaps unavoidable since the writers had already ruled out much that deep cosmopolitans would have considered the point of departure: a serious public conversation about the political virtues, the cultivation of citizens, and the anchoring of institutions in deeper truths. From any traditionalist perspective, the EU's blind spots add up to a serious birth defect.

To be sure, these observations may seem unduly harsh on one of the major political experiments of our time. Indeed, I am myself somewhat reluctant to make them, because a deep cosmopolitan should be sympathetic to some dimensions of what the EU is, especially in contrast to other political impulses around the world. If one sees nationalism as one of the great afflictions of modernity, and even as an intellectual regression to pre-civilisational groupthink, then the EU at least has the merit of not suffering from it. Much of the Eurosceptic commentary within EU member states has undertones of national aggrandisement or at least insularity, which run directly counter to a cosmopolitan project of any flavour. Most enthusiasts of European integration also have a heartening disdain for great-power realpolitik. Having learned their lesson from the carnage of the World Wars, they have little psychological investment in national primacy. They desire a future founded on universal and inclusive values.

The EU's accomplishments have proved powerfully attractive to middle-income countries in its neighbourhood, such as Turkey, that aspire to join it. To be sure, the EU is deeply divided on whether a country such as Turkey is culturally close enough to the rest of Europe and whether culture even matters. One vision of the EU is as a modern incarnation of Europe's cultural unity, with borders beyond which it cannot properly expand. This would make it a kind of enlightened version of the nation-state writ large. The other vision is as a neutral civic project that can admit any country that abides by universal liberal norms.⁹ In the latter logic, perhaps a future incarnation of the EU could eventually expand to incorporate newly liberalising states in much of Africa, the Middle East, and Eurasia.

This uncertainty about the EU's eventual scope might make little difference if there were already a larger-scale project of global integration underway along the same lines. But in the meantime, the experiment's resonance with non-Europeans of a liberal bent does show that a more ambitious project of global integration lurks in the imagination of many. The EU reality nests within a global vision. Many observers think that the EU is a microcosm of the whole world's future. If one pushed them to imagine what frameworks the world a century or two hence might have to manage trade, migration, human rights, and denizen participation, more often than not they would probably assume something along EU lines. The European experiment resonates elsewhere as a form of soft power, despite the retreat of European hard power in recent decades.

This irony, that Europe has weakened but at the same time become more appealing, should not be ignored. As Toynbee put it after the Second World War, the rise of new powers such as the United States and the Soviet Union meant 'the dwarfing of Europe'.¹⁰ Elsewhere in his sweeping study of history, he noted that a declining civilisation's last gasp is sometimes unification in a single superstate. When we combine the two, we see the EU experiment somewhat overshadowed by history. The debates it prompts about sovereignty and national identity occur against the backdrop of the relative decline not only of Europe, but indeed of the West as a whole. To the credit of those EU supporters thinking in universal terms, most accept that decline with fairly good grace, so long as decline happens only because other regions are catching up, and so long as their desired norms of governance and freedom spread at the same time.

We should be clear on this likelihood of the West's decline, because it defines much of the new global landscape on which cosmopolitans of all types must stake their claims. Obviously any predictions depend on the distribution of economic growth and demographic changes over the next couple of generations. In almost any scenario, though, Europe and North America will decline in relative, albeit not in absolute, terms. A recent Carnegie Endowment study estimated the scale of change between now and 2050. Because of investment and demographic trends, the highly developed countries will yield much of their share of the global economy to the largest developing countries. Within the influential G20 bloc, for example, the economic share of the industrialised G7 will drop from 72 per cent to 41 per cent of the total, while that of the largest five developing countries (China, India, Brazil, Russia, and Mexico) will rise from 20 per cent to 51 per cent.¹¹ As a share of world population, Europe and

North America are also likely to shrink from around 16 per cent to 12 per cent of the total.

I am not alone in thinking that, if such shifts are a matter of spreading prosperity, then I am willing to see this relative decline happen over my lifetime. Those who object have probably never walked around amid rural hovels or urban slums in the global South. Those of us with an instinct for justice and a desire to see different parts of the world open more to one another, with decent conditions of life for all human beings, must take for granted such a long-term evening out of wealth and power. Indeed, from a purely ethical standpoint, the shifts should go much further than these estimates suggest. Even by 2050, according to this scenario, much of the world's population would still be quite poor. I can also understand that, for many people in regions of the world long bullied by the West, such levelling is not only a matter of justice but also something of a psychological imperative. If some of them are tempted to take what seems like morbid satisfaction from the West's decline, then perhaps our first impulse should be to comprehend rather than to condemn. Those from the metropole, in particular, should not be too blasé about the deep sensitivities involved.

I say our first impulse. Whether it is also our second impulse should depend on many other considerations. As I said earlier, part of the reason any deep cosmopolitan might temper criticism of the EU is that it at least has abandoned the fixation on great-power realpolitik. Here is where we come to something of a litmus test for responses to the West's decline. Is the speaker celebrating that decline as the path to a juster and more open global landscape? Few would begrudge such hopes. And to be sure, that view is found quite often in smaller and medium-size countries, such as in much of Africa and Latin America.

Or is the speaker really still seeing the world through a lens of national uniqueness and collective self-assertion, such as the gunboat globalisation and racial Darwinism of nineteenth-century Europe? As we shall see, the larger the country—China to a great extent and India to a somewhat lesser degree—the more the temptation to see the West's decline not as David's triumph but as a chance to become Goliath oneself. Rather than the end of the global hierarchy, it is often merely a vision of someone else sitting at the top of it.

In the last few years, much of the talk about the West's decline has happened in the same breath as marvelling about China's rise. The last thirty years of rapid economic growth have expanded China's share of the world economy and swollen its self-confidence. Dependent on a growing economy for their

legitimacy, leaders in Beijing extrapolate the lines of growth and expect China to become the world's economic centre. Many foreign observers also buy into these predictions, including the more striking ones that China will 'rule the world' on all fronts by midcentury.¹² Whether these scenarios are plausible is open to debate, of course. Much is probably undue hype and hubris, given the injustices and tensions waiting to erupt within China and the temptation of onlookers who smell profit to paint a rosy picture.

But of more interest for our purposes is the way many people in China imagine these shifts on the global landscape. There is surely some glee brewing up at the prospect of Western decline. Many Chinese have an understandable resentment of what they see as fawning over Western culture by some of their compatriots. The trenchant social critic Liang Xiaosheng, for instance, mocked the tendency of some Westernised Chinese to speak English even among themselves and to cultivate the air of being abroad even while at home. Liang is a sensible and not particularly xenophobic critic, and he reserves his sharpest barbs for soulless moneymaking rather than for liberal cosmopolitans.¹³ A more nationalistic edge comes out in books such as *China Can Say No*, the authors of which wax indignantly about supposed Western plots to keep China down, and declare their desire to 'spit on that sort of Chinese person' who sells out the motherland.¹⁴

Perhaps this is merely a working through of demons or a hangover from the age of opium. Or perhaps the simmering nationalism in China has to do mainly with deep tensions within an ever more polarised and unjust Chinese society, much as a patient's fever is a sign of underlying illness. If so, time and social change will naturally lead to a very different China, and the world need not worry. Viewed in one light, the Chinese obsession with outgrowing other countries is simply about catching up and will mellow eventually. Liberal cosmopolitans fully expect China to join the global village and embrace the same vision. Indeed, when they look around the average Chinese city today, they will see much that is recognisably concrete, glass, and neon. A generation or so out, they expect national self-assertion to give way to something very like the EU mentality. And some evidence suggests this may already be happening. One recent analysis of Chinese film and advertising culture found that the prevailing tone is quite cosmopolitan and eager to define Chineseness as dynamic and outward looking. Even a video promoting the Confucius Institutes—the language academies that teach Chinese around the world—made much of Mandarin's usefulness in international business.¹⁵

But viewed in another light, all the talk about a ‘Chinese century’ is more sinister. I recall asking one of my classes in Nanjing why, compared to other parts of the world, so much of Chinese economic development seems to be less about the quality of life for ordinary people than about relative national standing. One of my more articulate students replied that ‘It’s in our blood to want to be number one, the centre of the world. That will never change. It’s like playing with fireworks at the New Year.’ On another occasion, he remarked that perhaps after China had had its own turn at the top of the world for three hundred years, things could finally even out.

We should not make too much of any one message. China has many voices. But the world inevitably must ask where mainstream Chinese political culture fits on the global landscape. Is it converging with liberal cosmopolitanism? Is it yearning for racial revenge? Or has it the potential to line up on the side of something different and more promising, closer to the spirit of deep cosmopolitanism?

I have heard some otherwise nationalistic young Chinese people say that China has no imperial ambitions because it has never been aggressive in its history, unlike Europe’s record of overrunning other continents. It is unsurprising that they would repeat the claim, since it has become part of the official narrative in recent years. A lot of foreign China hands, smitten with the idea of China’s uniqueness and its merits as a counterweight to the West, buy into it as well. Others who dig into the realities of Chinese history cast doubt on it, however. Alastair Iain Johnston and Wang Yuankang, for example, have done systematic studies of Chinese strategic culture and military decisionmaking in past centuries. They found that, despite the peaceful and moralistic tone of Confucian high culture, such idealism had little practical effect on how leaders dealt with enemies. Whether on the central Asian frontier or in southeast Asia, Chinese armies held back when weak and went on the offensive when strong. ‘Chinese strategic decisionmaking’, Johnston argues, ‘reflects an essentially realpolitik calculus of force and opportunity.’ He and Wang differ on whether this tendency was a distinct Chinese military culture, transmitted over the generations, or simply a universal response to the pressures of interstate politics, as in other parts of the world. Either way, the lesson would seem to be that China, as it gets more powerful, will find its allegedly distinct Confucian culture no restraint at all.¹⁶

On the prediction, only time will tell. But the core issue of how a rising China will engage the world does deserve closer scrutiny. Is there any hope that

China's rise could help revive a tolerant cosmopolitanism? In other words, could a future China be neither a clone of the liberal West nor an aggressive empire?

One of the more vocal advocates of a distinctive Chinese foreign policy is Qinghua University international relations theorist Zhao Tingyang. In a book the title of which can loosely be translated as *The System of World-Under-Heaven* (天下体系 *tiānxià tǐxì*), Zhao argues that the old imperial ideal was 'worldness', exemplified in the loosely organised Zhou dynasty, before the Warring States, and later fleshed out in Confucian ethics. This Chinese mode of tolerance was open to the whole world, admitting all diversity and drawing no hard boundaries. In the West, in contrast, all the way from ancient Christianity to modern times, the cultural logic has been one of evangelising the 'other', if necessary by force. If China can recover its earlier approach to international relations, and the influence to implement it, Zhao foresees global harmony. In passing, he adds that such an approach to international relations does not have to be Sinocentric. '[T]he theory of All-under-Heaven has no discriminating rule to deny the opportunity for any nation to be in charge of the governance of All-under-Heaven.'¹⁷

Political thinker Sheng Hong echoes Zhao Tingyang's approach. He claims that, unlike the aggressive West, Confucian China has a longstanding pattern of tolerance and accommodation of others. He even cites the 1700s Rites Controversy to show that Christianity is inherently less tolerant than Confucianism. This 'civilisation of world-under-Heaven' can inspire future Chinese foreign policy, he thinks. Post-1949 China has shown great self-restraint, and while it must be able to use force for self-defence, it can influence other countries mainly by moral example rather than intervention. Sheng insists that the essence of Chinese political culture is cosmopolitanism. Just as China ended the turmoil of the Warring States period, so too can a rising China bring peace to the world.¹⁸

Such optimistic claims about China's future cosmopolitanism have drawn criticism. Zhao's *tiānxià* vision was taken to task in 2008 by American international relations scholar William A Callahan, for example. Callahan argued that despite all the talk about harmony and legitimacy, Zhao's model was ultimately very hierarchical and Sinocentric. Even when it proposed drawing people all around the world into universal Chinese values, it came across as a steamroller with no sensitivity to those who did not wish to be incorporated.¹⁹ Criticism of the *tiānxià* vision has also come from other Chinese intellectuals, such as historian Lei Yi of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Lei rejected

any claim that the old notion of *tiānxià* was broader or more universal than modern nationalism. He insisted that it discriminated against outsiders. It naturally flowed into the exclusive nationalism of the twentieth century, once it came up against other civilisations it could not dominate.²⁰

These critics are right to note that the likes of Zhao Tingyang and Sheng Hong hardly make a persuasive case for deep-rooted Chinese tolerance. Indeed, the tone of their writings is often at cross-purposes with the stated intent. They go through contortions to downplay the real diversity within the Western heritage. Was ancient Chinese civilisation different from the modern West? Of course it was. So were ancient Rome and mediæval Christendom. Yet according to Zhao and Sheng, a common thread of selfishness, materialism, and evangelising aggression supposedly runs all the way through from ancient Athens to today's Washington. Every claim about China being open to humanity eventually comes back to a visceral contrast between Chinese and foreigners as a way to affirm Chinese superiority and bludgeon one's foreign adversaries. Perhaps they do not truly wish to legitimise future ambitions of world conquest. But if one did, one might well start with this sort of worldview.

At the same time, the critics of Zhao and Sheng share with them a common misunderstanding. Both those who talk about age-old Chinese tolerance and non-aggression and those who talk about age-old Chinese racism or strategic hard-headedness miss a crucial discontinuity in history. One can make a case that something like a *tiānxià* civilisational openness did exist on some level, in the past. Some of its features do parallel what I described in the first half of this book. But there is hardly any continuity in political culture between that past and China's present. Today's aggressive nationalism and the regime that sustains it are arrivistes on history's stage.

For one thing, the sort of people who hold power in China today are an entirely different breed from the old scholar-officials. They are largely technocrats who have risen through the ranks based on sharp survival instincts and an ability to play the modern game of wealth and power. They have far more in common with the Legalists of the Qin empire than with the Confucians. Indeed, when pressed, most of the time they have little real sympathy with Confucianism except as a convenient national symbol. They disdain it as a drag on their fevered ambitions for yet more economic growth. It is hard to take seriously the claim that their regime has no hegemonic ambitions when alongside such rhetoric they also speak of being patient in foreign policy ambitions and 'biding one's time'. For a regime that regularly crushes protests,

moreover, it is revealing that it looks the other way when Chinese demonstrators hurl shocking levels of vitriol at neighbouring countries and physically attack individual foreigners. In the ongoing dispute with Japan over a few uninhabited islands, banners have appeared at demonstrations calling for the nuclear obliteration of Tokyo and other such genocidal visions. Such sentiments are the product of a carefully instilled nationalistic sense of grievance that has become a pillar of the regime's legitimacy over the last generation.

In the end, it is hard to imagine any plausible link between a regime of this character and the cosmopolitanism that some thinkers lay claim to from China's past. Those Chinese thinkers who insist on millennia of cultural continuity do not make a very strong case for the world to welcome China's rise. Take Yan Xuetong, the hawkish director of the Institute of International Studies at Qinghua University.²¹ He is a self-professed nationalist fond of 'hard issues such as power, war, peace, and security'. But he also claims to find in the pre-Qin philosophers—a grab-bag of Confucians, Daoists, Legalists and others—inspiration for a rising China. He thinks that their emphasis on the moral qualities of political leadership offers lessons for how China can gain credibility as a dominant power to replace the United States. To Yan's credit, he does see the character of Chinese politics and society as a factor in its global influence, rather than relying on military and economic weight alone. Intriguingly, he hints at a more open China as well, when he says that the ancients appreciated the need to recruit talent from all over the world. He even proposes that 'China should promote the principle of freedom to travel, to live, and to work anywhere in the world'. In short, a dominant China must also be a decent society and an attractive polity.

Something rings hollow about this vision, however. Any genuine Confucian would detect in Yan's writing an underlying obsession with China's rise. Power always lurks in the background of his comments, suggesting that China's supposed ethical colouring is more an instrument for influencing the world than a goal in itself. His vision of the world is also deeply hierarchical, with dominant powers defining the rules and a new kind of vassalhood to be imposed on small countries. This is hardly an affirmation of openness and global citizenship as goods in themselves. It is a more sophisticated form of nationalistic Darwinism. After all, Yan affirms that 'the struggle for hegemony is still the core of international politics'. Even the idea of attracting talent to China has to do mainly with displaying which way is up. 'We may take the movement of talented persons among nations as an indicator to assess national political power.

People naturally head for the top places just as water naturally flows downhill.’

Such voices are merely one part of a diverse landscape, to be sure. I do not doubt that some sincere Confucians have a cosmopolitan vision of China’s future and distance themselves from the regime’s realpolitik. But the closer to the establishment one gets—Yan Xuetong, for example, has opined that more people like him should be appointed as political advisers—the more ambitions of power colour the ethical language that is invoked. Abroad, the tradition becomes an instrument of soft power; at home, it lends legitimacy to elites about whom the ancient philosophers would have many a misgiving. The powerful who today claim the mantle of China’s heritage would probably not be recognised as purveyors of civilisation, by their own or other people’s ancestors. Their rupture with the past is studiously ignored or glossed over by these writers.

When culture is a weapon, its essence evaporates. The writings of other intellectuals close to the political elite dwell on themes of ‘cultural sovereignty’ and the ability to ‘launch’ Chinese values on the global stage as a rival to the West. Everything comes down to a struggle for survival and influence among ‘political civilisations’, which must remain forever on their own unique trajectories. Global civil society is not a universal space so much as a tool for the West to impose itself on China. Resisting its incursions and building up Chinese power are vital tasks, to gain respect as an equal. Such visions of equality among civilisations are oddly selective, though. They imagine the world as a stage for competition between China and the West, with other civilisations largely ignored.²²

These mental templates are heavily influenced by a racialised view of the world. Important strands of popular opinion and media discourse play up a global hierarchy of races. European peoples are outsiders but useful because they have advanced technology to offer, while Africans are at the bottom, and India is, as one young fellow told me, merely ‘the backyard of the West’. The contempt for dark-skinned peoples fits into the pattern of what sociologist Robert E. Williams has called ‘brown racism’.²³ Whether in China, South Asia, the Middle East, or Latin America, peoples who occupied a middling rank in the world during the age of white imperialism often still look down on those darker than themselves.

Such ideas might seem abstract, but they have real impact in how darker-skinned people are treated in today’s China. In 2009, a young contestant named Lou Jing sang on a Shanghai television show. She had been raised in Shanghai by a Shanghaiese mother, and spoke Shanghaiese and Mandarin with no accent.

But her father, with whom she had had no contact, was an African-American. After the broadcast, netizens' reactions to this mixed-race novelty ranged from pleasant curiosity to the sort of racist commentary that, if translated into African languages, would probably have ruined China's image in Africa for a generation. Often the depth of such attitudes is not even acknowledged. The same year as Lou Jing's appearance, journalist Martin Jacques published a bestselling book called *When China Rules the World*. In most respects, it offered an optimistic perspective inoffensive to the Chinese establishment. His main criticism was a chapter on racial prejudice against dark-skinned foreigners.²⁴ Apparently there was pressure to edit out that part in the Chinese translation.

Lou Jing's mixed ancestry unnerved those who like to keep boundaries intact. Compared to most periods of Chinese history, the boundary between inside and outside is today rather more pronounced, or at least racialised. Countless foreigners, from all over the world, remark that their foreignness seems to matter more in daily interactions here than in other countries. A very old saying crops up from time to time as the crystallisation of such matter-of-fact consciousness of difference: 'Someone not of my race must have a different mentality' (非我族类, 其心必异 *Fēi wǒ zúlèi, qí xīn bì yì*). Assimilation of immigrants is far less likely in modern China than it was in, say, the Tang dynasty. I once asked my Chinese students how they might feel about future immigration to fill the labour shortage that is likely to arise as China's population ages. I noted that, if the British and French experience were any guideline, the hundred thousand or so Africans living today in Guangzhou—one neighbourhood of which is now nicknamed 'Chocolate City'—could turn into more than a quarter of the city population forty years hence. Their mouths dropped open. One fellow replied that if that happened to Guangzhou, he would surely not want to go there. Another, rather more tolerant on the surface, said that he had no problem with letting immigrants settle in China. Then he added that they would not threaten national identity, as they had in Europe, because Chinese society was 'cohesive' enough to remember who was really Chinese, and thus to keep interlopers at bay.

From one perspective, Chinese mental templates about foreigners could be dismissed as a lack of 'political correctness', and perhaps not worth thinking about too much. If just a set of stereotypes about the world, and a disdain for people perceived as lowly, then Chinese xenophobia would look much like insularity in general, and 'brown racism' in particular, in other parts of the world. However distasteful such things might be, they are more or less natural

and understandable, stemming from lack of exposure to the world's diversity, mental inertia, and the human need to look down on someone, somewhere. Moreover, one would expect these attitudes to change as societies open and horizons expand.

Yet for many of us who observe Chinese society, it seems this is not quite the same as what happens in Latin America, the Middle East, or South Asia. Compared to the global average, the importance of the insider–outsider distinction is much greater in China, though it crops up too in Japan and South Korea. The difference is that in China, unlike even in other East Asian societies, this fixation is surprisingly important even among people who should know better, so to speak. In most parts of the world, the more educated are usually less insular and more likely to be at ease with foreigners. Not only has contemporary China not opened psychologically to the world as much as other social changes would predict. The sort of people who elsewhere would have fewer entrenched assumptions about foreigners tend to have, in China, even more of them. Consider the following, which happens more often than one might imagine. A visible foreigner might have matter-of-fact interactions with peasants and street vendors in the morning. Then in the afternoon, one might hear the university-educated either musing about immemorial differences between ‘you foreigners’ and ‘us Chinese’, or falling into the sort of overscripted or nervous interactions that in other countries are confined to tour guides and twelve-year-olds.

Such impressions are anecdotal, to be sure. But when one hears the same sort of complaint countless times over the years, from foreigners of all backgrounds—and particularly if they have lived in many other countries as a baseline for comparison—then one might conclude that some distinctive dynamics are in play in China. I would argue that at least up to a certain level, more exposure to the Chinese education system and other arms of the state has a concertedly anti-cosmopolitan effect. This is an anomaly in the world. State institutions in countries such as Brazil, Kenya, and India do not urge their publics to overthink essential differences between insiders and outsiders; typically they are either indifferent or mildly pro-cosmopolitan, especially when dealing with the more comfortable classes. In China, however, the state's message tends to worsen prejudices rather than to combat them. The political education classes that Chinese students must take through to the postgraduate level put many of them to sleep, from what I hear, but some of the rhetoric about Chinese uniqueness and unbridgeable chasms with the foreign must seep in. This is, perhaps, why the educated in China often seem to dwell on what separates them from the world.

Practices that date back decades also drive the point home. Old Soviet-style restrictions on where foreigners can travel, and what hotels they can book, linger on as part of China's 'foreigner-managing' bureaucracy.²⁵ State and society flow into one another. Both propaganda and policy can have poisonous effects on the thinking of those exposed to them.

To be fair, these effects vary greatly. They are strongest among those with a solid but not stellar undergraduate education—roughly, those with a lot of exposure to the regime's message but not quite enough critical thinking. More modest folk in the street or in the countryside often seem to care little about such things, and to deal with anyone as a matter of course. And among the highly intelligent, or those with plenty of postgraduate study or foreign travel, the effect weakens quite quickly, and they converge with their counterparts elsewhere.

Many of my Chinese postgraduate students, for example, can think critically about such issues and take for granted that China will become more open, even more multicultural, in coming decades. That said, the least xenophobic also tend, for the same reasons as elsewhere in the world, to be liberal cosmopolitans of a sort. In much the same way as in the West—or in other developing countries—they would prefer to get along without having to consider different sorts of common ground. The old Confucian high culture is, to put it bluntly, already so dead among the educated that few even imagine a nonliberal basis for mutual respect among the world's peoples. Still, there is a range of views in China as in other countries. Any eventual backlash against today's rising inequality, materialism, and moral vacuum is likely to open up some fruitful debates about what Chineseness means on a global landscape as well.

In any case, China is just one part of the world, even if it is the part that has received the most attention of late as a potential rival to the West. The trend toward competitive insularity holds across what is left of the other civilisations, too. In India, Hindu nationalism involves many of the same sentiments, even though it is one among many political blocs rather than an elite consensus. The banner of Hindutva, or 'Hinduness', does not have the old spiritual doctrines inscribed on it. According to its intellectual founder in the 1920s, V D Savarkar, and as refined by M S Golwalkar and later militant leaders, Hindutva means instead a nationalistic allegiance to a common culture and the Hindu motherland. In the name of 'that race spirit which has survived all the shocks of centuries of aggression', the Hindutvadis demand that India's minorities, especially Muslims and Christians, assimilate to the nation. They can keep their religious practices, but must identify above all with India rather than with any foreign holy land or

distant coreligionists.²⁶ Just as many Islamists have lashed out violently in the name of religious orthodoxy, so too have the Hindutvadis unleashed riots across the subcontinent. Perhaps their version of India, of a Hindu state, has more permeable racial and spiritual boundaries than China. But it is hardly any more faithful to its cosmopolitan past. The Hindu nationalists' image of the subcontinent as a sacred space slides all too easily into territorial nationalism and repression of religious minorities who have cross-border loyalties.

In a striking parallel with China, those Hindu nationalists who foresee India's rise to superpower status also claim that it will offer tolerance to the world. Such 'world-unifying thought' hinges on Hinduism's alleged ability to enfold vast diversity. As Savarkar put it, 'whatever could be found in the world is found here too. And if anything is not found here it could be found nowhere.'²⁷ This hardly seems a manifesto for a world civilisation, except perhaps in the strained logic that India and the world are one, and that one is India. Moreover, much as in China, rhetoric of a distinct superpower universalism too often comes across as mere nationalist apology or even disingenuousness about the aims of future self-assertion. From a deep cosmopolitan perspective, any promising alternative in India is likely to emerge as a counterweight to such nationalist fantasies, not in alliance with them. Unlike China, the Indian state at least does not play wholeheartedly to the nationalist gallery.

What of the brethren westward in the Muslim world? One might well expect a more open outlook there. A monotheistic and convert-seeking religion such as Islam is, after all, universalistic by nature. Yet it too often gets interpreted in insular ways. Take the two leading thinkers of the Islamist revival, who have inspired so many activists across the Muslim world for the last two generations: the Egyptians Hassan al-Bannā and Sayyid Quṭb.²⁸ Al-Bannā, writing in the 1930s and 1940s, looked askance at the modern West and wanted to liberate Egypt and the Arab world from its influence. Unsurprisingly for the era, he used language of national liberation akin to that of the secular independence activists. Efforts at revival had to focus within 'the horizons of the Islamic fatherland'. Al-Bannā's preferred strategy involved education and gradual cultural change, leading to the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood. In contrast, Quṭb took a more radical tack in which violent seizure of the state might be appropriate. He made much of the boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims, but redrew it to reflect the secularisation of many nominal Muslims in countries such as Egypt. Muslims who gave themselves over to drinking and debauchery were outside true Islam, he declared, and had cast their lot with the infidels.

This trenchant critique certainly has its universal features, dealing with the ‘what’ rather than the ‘who’. Quṭb insisted that Islam ‘is for the whole world’. But a xenophobia of sorts also permeates these versions of it. Al-Bannā blamed the long decline of Islamic civilisation on an infatuation with outside cultures. Quṭb likewise urged true Muslims to reject values from abroad. They could learn from the West in neutral technical and scientific fields, but should avoid anything smacking of comparative religion or philosophy or social thought. Such Western ideas were tainted by paganism and ‘at loggerheads’ with the true faith. To be sure, the Islamists’ desire to turn inward is generally not paired with grandiose ideas of throwing their weight around internationally. Without the demographic and economic weight of a potential Chinese or Indian superpower—even if Islamists came to power in several countries at once—the temptation to dictate to the world is weaker. Still, the desire to engage non-Muslims is often weak. This version of Islam is a far cry from how many of their ancestors in the Middle Ages sought common ground with other faiths. As one of my Yemeni Arabic teachers, otherwise a discerning and enlightened woman, said some years ago when asked about the obligation to relieve suffering in distant lands, ‘I only care about Muslims.’

We could find countless other examples around the world. This is what I shall call the *insularity problem*, and it is the Achilles’ heel of most tradition-inspired alternatives to liberal globalisation. While today’s most visible cosmopolitan experiments such as the European Union turn their back on tradition, the discontented who invoke the banner of one or another civilisation generally want to have nothing to do with one another.

If we look back over the trajectory of civilisations in world history, we see a trend to ever greater universalism. What has happened today is a kind of regression. Those claiming to speak for civilisations nowadays have retreated to a rather defensive, group- and place-based view of who they are. If they really upheld the old universal truths, then they would be much more open to talking about them as the common heritage of humanity. Instead, the tradition is often turned into an excuse for self-congratulation, for talking about what is ‘ours’ in contrast to everyone else. The obsession with international hierarchies is the other side of the same coin. If a tradition is merely a collective possession and a marker of identity, then the global landscape turns into an arena for the competitive jostling of power blocs. The burden of a civilising mission has lightened. Now it is a mere chip on the shoulder.

In the next chapter, I dig more deeply into the sources of the insularity

problem. It plays out on a global landscape of power, of those who are rising and those who are falling, but its intellectual roots go much deeper. To recover the universal, critical potential of the great traditions means going back to the beginning, in a sense, to break down the walls that have sprung up around them in the last couple of generations.



The Tower of Babel. Engraving by Gustave Doré, 1880.

10 Relearning How to Talk Across Traditions

Modernity makes one wonder about roads not taken. The trajectory of deep cosmopolitanism advanced erratically over twenty centuries up to the 1600s. It seemed on the verge of breaking through into the mechanisms of dialogue for a true world civilisation to emerge in the long run. Then the rise of global capitalism sent everything awry. Modernity bound the world together in a new way, which put the civilisations on the retreat rather than intensifying their integration. Humanity was to meet on the bedrock of self-interest.

From the standpoint of the deep cosmopolitans of 1600 or before, today's globalisation would hardly be recognisable as a common human project. Even if they might welcome its scale, they would have misgivings about its content. What the ancients and mediævals saw as the most vital human questions, centred on ethics and spirituality, are largely ignored in today's public culture. This is partly because, chastened by religious wars in early modern Europe, some believe they can buy peace by bracketing arguments about truth. It also cannot be overlooked that today's consumer society comes into tension with some of the more rigorous visions of the good life.

If one thinks that today's globalisation suffers from an ethical vacuum, and proposes to look to the traditions to fill it, one still comes up against the problem of exactly how those traditions can interlock on the global landscape. Vagueness, even if it springs from a desire to tread lightly, will not get us very far.

Take two prominent thinkers who have written extensively on global ethics, roughly at the intersection of religion and liberalism. Hans Küng, a Swiss Catholic theologian, has argued that there can be 'no new world order without a new world ethic'. He has long urged dialogue among religions as a basis for world peace. Global institutions will have to be sustained by a global ethic, which Küng finds in the overlap among religions. Such shared principles include fairness, tolerance, truthfulness, solidarity, and humane treatment of all people

regardless of their background. He explains that such commitments are only a ‘necessary minimum’. Because they do not get too specific, they are also ‘not directed against anyone’. We hear much the same argument from the British philosopher Nigel Dower, who alongside his academic writing has also worked in the Quaker peace movement and lobbied for more generous international aid. Dower argues for a common global ethic with much the same content as what Küng lays out. He says that this ethic need not be seen as a discovery of metaphysical truth. Rather, it can just emerge from negotiation, as a ‘common core accepted in any society’.¹

No doubt Küng and Dower, and many thoughtful people like them, genuinely want to smooth the rough edges of globalisation. If such a common global ethic guided decisionmaking, it surely would help relieve human suffering and lessen conflict. Yet a deep cosmopolitan will find it unsatisfying. Thinkers such as Küng and Dower mention older religious and ethical traditions in a rather half-hearted way. The traditions offer a vague sentiment and perhaps some ethical vocabulary, but not much more.² The idea of traditions as carriers of truth is abandoned, when Dower says that the ‘common core’ is negotiated rather than ‘discovered’. Moreover, anyone critical of the excesses of the modern world may fear that such a global ethic misses the point. If, as Küng claims, a global ethic is ‘not directed against anyone’, then it must have very little to say after all. The world has many obvious fault lines and clashes of values. Moral clarity is impossible if all values are shared by everyone, and if no one can be said to be pushing the world in the wrong direction.

Such an approach has much in common with the liberal cosmopolitanism of Appiah and others whom I mentioned at the beginning of this book. For the liberal cosmopolitans—and for those seeking a minimalist global ethic ‘not directed against anyone’, who are often the same people—tolerance is the supreme value. In noting as much, I do not wish to imply that we should practise intolerance instead. Intolerance can cause much stupidity and suffering, as any deep cosmopolitan of the past would hasten to agree. But for a deep cosmopolitan, the point of reaching out across civilisations is because they have something to say to each other. On its own, each civilisation appreciates truths that can enrich the lives of all human beings. If people from different civilisations can get past the varying ways they understand those truths and how they express them, they might end up more enlightened together than they were separately. In contrast, in the sort of tepid liberal cosmopolitanism we see today, tolerance is not about seeking truth. In the end, it has little to do with the beliefs

that are being tolerated. It is about tolerating the people who hold those beliefs, for the sake of tolerating them. There it starts and ends.

But exactly why one tolerates other people does matter. Theories of tolerance fall into several camps. First, one could urge tolerance as a truce to avoid conflict. Leave others to their own devices and keep the state from taking sides, and one would no longer need to fight. Second, one could say that all individuals should have the right to choose their own way of life. Each to his or her own, because truth is in the eye of the beholder. Third, one might think that some beliefs are truer than others, but that it is meaningless to impose them. It only counts if the believer sincerely embraces truth rather than being forced to do so. Fourth, one could say that each tradition has part of the truth, but not all of it, and that the only way to get the whole truth is to bring them into open dialogue. Fifth, one could believe that different traditions spring from the same source, and that one should tolerate them all because in the end they are saying similar things.³ Liberal cosmopolitanism today relies mainly on the second argument for tolerance—free choice because values are up to personal preference—and occasionally throws in the first argument—tolerance for the sake of peace—as a dark hint at what happens otherwise. It has little to say about the third, fourth, and fifth reasons, because those reasons all assume that the point of tolerance is advancing truth, not respect for respect's sake.

These different rationales affect how people with different beliefs can talk to each other. Deep cosmopolitans will take others' beliefs seriously because they might learn something from them. They would also think it obvious that if another person's beliefs contain truth, then it is a truth that speaks to everyone, not just to the person in question. If truth is true, to so speak, then it is a common possession.

A story from over a decade ago shows how different the liberal cosmopolitan line of thinking is from this. In late September 2001, soon after the carnage of the 9/11 attacks, President George W Bush addressed the American Congress. In a rare gesture to Muslim sensibilities, he declared that '[Islamic] teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah. The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying, in effect, to hijack Islam itself.' The excesses that the Bush administration then proceeded to unleash on the Muslim world are well known. But the observation about terrorism as a betrayal of Islam was a reasonable point, which many Muslim theologians have made themselves.

The next day, one of my fellow doctoral students at Princeton, a committed

European liberal, remarked over dinner that Bush was quite wrong to make such a statement. He did not mean that Islam was violent, and I know that he had read parts of the Qur'ān and respected Muslims. Rather, he thought it improper for a non-Muslim such as Bush to make any statement about the true meaning of a faith to which he did not belong. Only Muslims could define the teachings of Islam. Now this claim was about much more than whether Bush knew what he was talking about. It meant that there was no true meaning of Islam accessible to all human beings as such, beyond what Muslims at one or another moment happened to believe. Truth was a possession, an identity. To talk about it as a common reference point was to intrude impolitely.

This troubling view of truth runs through liberal cosmopolitanism. In Appiah's book, published four years later, he made a very similar argument:

It is pointless, I think, for those of us who are not Muslims to say what is real and what is ersatz Islam.... It is up to those who want to sail under the flags of Christianity or of Islam to determine (and explain, if they wish to) what their banners mean.

In much the same vein, the Indian social critic Dipankar Gupta has insisted that we can only properly respect individuals, not traditions. Those individuals can choose whatever they want to believe from among available 'artefacts' of culture, but should not feel bound in any way to 'straitjacketed community grids' that would define proper ways of living.⁴ Such a view of truth—as something someone outside an identity should not engage—would seem bizarre to any deep cosmopolitan from the past. When Ricci spent years learning the Confucian classics so he could talk about them, he hardly thought that they were the property of whatever live scholar-official happened to be drinking tea across a table from him. He thought they were serious and even inspired texts, speaking to anyone and ready for anyone to speak about.

Much of the modern academy also reduces truth to a matter of perspective. Consider anthropology, for example, which two eminent practitioners have called 'the practical embodiment of relativism'.⁵ No longer do most cultural anthropologists seek to understand human nature across diverse societies, as many tried to do in the nineteenth century. Nowadays, anthropology is more of a literary exercise in 'thick description' of each distinct culture, with its own ways of looking at the world. As the leading anthropologist Clifford Geertz put it, we can aim only to grasp unfamiliar 'frames of awareness'. The human mind is the

same everywhere—the ‘psychic unity of mankind’, he called it—but what we do with it varies radically from place to place and people to people. ‘Thought is spectacularly multiple as product and wondrously singular as process.’⁶

When the anthropologist looks at a radically different culture, according to Geertz, ‘diverging commotions’ are set off in the mind. No deeper truth lies behind the startling contrast with one’s own culture. Rather, the observer can only hope that ‘the deeply different can be deeply known without becoming any less different’. The shock of the unfamiliar is precisely the point, as two other anthropologists put it—‘a desire to enlighten their readers about other ways of life, but often with the aim of disturbing their cultural self-satisfaction’.⁷ Here they do not dig down beneath a diversity of customs and symbols and rituals to an ethical bedrock, the way a deep cosmopolitan might do. Instead, much like the authors of postmodern novels, they relish the disruption of certainty, to throw off balance those who take themselves too seriously.

That approach has several implications, some more obvious than others. Often anthropologists get taken to task by critics because relativism might make it impossible to judge right and wrong. If a certain tribe solemnly slays every third child, then that is just the way they like it, and outsiders should withhold judgement. I think this criticism is somewhat overstated and might caricature what most anthropologists are up to. Many respond that anthropology is not ‘denying a hierarchy of basic human values (with tolerance near the top)’. Geertz explains that rather than wanting to obscure right and wrong, he merely wants to shift the focus away from common human experience and try to get inside the different perspectives that societies have.⁸ Perhaps the basis for moral judgement is quite thin, but not wholly lacking. While most anthropologists might be reluctant to say so, they may just assume that commerce and rights are enough to bind a diverse world together.

More interesting is where that way of thinking about the world fits into the trajectory of cosmopolitanism that I have traced so far. At the end of history, ironically, things go back to what looks eerily like the beginning. As examples of the deep diversity of cultures, Geertz mentions Bali, Java, and Morocco. He makes much of how in such societies, roles are more important than personal feelings and people are often defined by their kin group. All these mentalities stand in stark contrast to individualistic Western culture, moreover.⁹ All this is quite plausible in itself, though one wonders if the cultures in question really differ so starkly from one another, or from small rural communities since time immemorial. On a broader view, however, one might wonder why

anthropologists are more likely to focus on some experiences rather than others. Far more people in recent centuries have lived under the umbrella of one or another complex and stratified civilisation—of the sort described in the first half of this book—than in, say, an Amazonian hunter-gatherer or Indian hill tribe setting. Yet modern anthropology always seems more interested in the latter than the former. The ayatollahs of Karbala somehow do not offer the right grist for the anthropological mill.

Now one part of this preference for studying some people rather than others is understandable. Anthropologists usually want to give voice to the voiceless. Tight-knit communities at the margins of literate high culture or isolated from it altogether may have been ignored for much of history. Fair enough. But anthropology, as literally the study of humankind, also professes to seek the most essentially human. Here the preference for small-scale and custom-bound societies has its built-in logic. The old high cultures had a pesky habit of thinking they knew something about truth. Small communities of the sort that get many anthropologists' attention today are akin to the communities that predated the Axial Age breakthrough and the first-order universalisms. They do not dwell on universal truth. Customs are worth keeping because they are theirs, not because they are good for all human beings. I am reminded of an anthropologist who once told me of having asked some folk in the Amazon why people in another village did not talk of the same gods. 'Because that's over there', they replied matter-of-factly. 'Of course they have different gods.' In the recounting, this was a sign of enlightenment. If life is largely a matter of perspective, where better to study humanity than among those who see no need to pierce through to a higher truth? Anthropological relativism is yet another escape from the ambition of the deep cosmopolitans.

In noting this, I should hasten to add that I bear no grudge against small communities in the Amazon or elsewhere. Quite the contrary. Like anyone sympathetic to traditional life, I believe there are real virtues and a genuine decency in such settings, and that they should be assaulted less by the modern world. I have argued as much in my other books. Nor do I take lightly the often noble motives behind what many anthropologists do today. They are right to worry about the misuse of universalism and the hubris of those who confidently believe their own way of life is true always and everywhere.

But that concern should not be painted with too broad a brush. To be sure, the self-congratulatory sort of person who rants about civilisation and barbarism might be rather intolerant and heavyhanded with so-called barbarians. But this

risk lessens once we get to a third- or fourth-order universalism. Deep cosmopolitans are unlikely to be the worst offenders when it comes to imposing themselves on other people. I should be unlikely to mistreat a stranger if I think that I share some underlying beliefs with him or her, or that we can teach each other something and work together. If I take truth seriously, as something comprehensible to both of us, then I am going to feel as much bound by truth as I am by the law of gravity. Perhaps in a fiendish moment I could use truth to bludgeon said stranger, just as I could also use gravity to trip the stranger up. But I am more likely to find that both truth and gravity restrain me.

If we have only vivid myths that we invent separately, then what are we supposed to talk about? Perhaps we can recount our own myths, which we each own because we invented them, and then either enjoy listening to each other or start mocking others' flights of fancy. But such an encounter is in a different league from the serious conversations that took place across civilisations in centuries past. Those conversations had a topic 'owned' by none of the conversationalists. Unfortunately, today's liberal cosmopolitans—and their stepchildren, the relativists—think such conversations are futile if they aim too deep. If there are only 'our' invented myths, then we are left entertaining each other at a convivial picnic in the global village. Or, more likely, we flounder about as in the story of the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel.

To start imagining an alternative to today's mode of globalisation, we must be clear on what it even means to have a conversation across cultures. Imagine a landscape covered in fog, with valleys beneath and mountain peaks rising out of it. Several sturdy hermits live halfway up each mountain but, feeling lonely, have a sudden urge to reach out and talk with one another. They have two options. They can descend through the fog and find each other in the valleys. For those who do not mind foggy valleys, such is the natural meeting ground. The other option might appeal more to those who prefer the rarefied and bracing air of the uplands. They could clamber up to where the fog thins out and perhaps clears completely. By squinting a bit, they might catch a glimpse of one another in the distance. With stout enough lungs and crisp enough air, they might even hear one another calling in the distance.

The older type of cosmopolitan gazes across at other peaks, from atop the ideals that rise out of each civilisation. Today's globalisers have acrophobia and descend into the fog instead.

A cosmopolitanism of the peaks calls forth our higher aspirations. That alone would be reason enough to want to revive it. But when the peaks are also being

eroded and are under threat of vanishing into the fog altogether, matters become more urgent. The cosmopolitan challenge today is about much more than how to connect civilisations with one another. It is about whether the best those civilisations have to offer will survive at all, even separately. For liberal modernity continues to batter away even at what remains after the erosion of the last two centuries.

But if it must fall to the traditionalists to restore ethical content to today's rather thin mode of globalisation, we run into an inescapable fact. Bluntly put, most traditionalists have never been, by inclination, especially cosmopolitan. The curious and eccentric people I described in the first half of this book were more the exception than the rule. Their desire to reach out to one another was something of a luxury, in that the core of each civilisation would continue no matter what they did. Today, traditionalists can hardly afford to be insular. If they do not claim the widest horizons of globalisation in their own way, then the only globalisation will continue to be the present one of concrete, glass, and neon. Only by abandoning the limited scale of the traditions as they now exist, and bringing them into alliance with one another, is there any hope of affirming the essential truths that they separately embody.

Such an alliance means picking up where the trajectory stopped around the 1600s. If history had a direction from the Axial Age up to the industrial revolution, however vague and erratic, then that direction can be rediscovered. Getting back on track would fulfil the promise of a fourth-order universalism, which was barely foreshadowed in the encounters of the 1500s. It also offers the only way out of the present crisis of traditions. To revive the old civilisations separately would require more raw material and more vitality than I suspect any of them still have on their own. Defensive revivals will go nowhere. Moreover, the old civilisations are outmatched by the global reach of liberal modernity. To generate a real cosmopolitanism of traditions, then the traditions all have to meet in a multidirectional renaissance. From the defunct civilisations, a world civilisation can rise anew.

I admit that putting things this way will raise the hackles of some traditionalists at the outset. Many of the most vocal ones think it impossible to bring traditions together in this way. The Scottish Catholic communitarian philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre says that '[t]here is no standing ground, no place for inquiry ... apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or other.' He thinks people can have a conversation about ethics only when they share a common vocabulary and the same reference points. According to

MacIntyre, only modern liberals imagine they can pull human beings out of any cultural context and talk outside traditions. Since traditions are wholes, when they meet, one eventually has to give way to the other. The victor will be the one that can explain gaps within the other tradition better than vice versa. As an historical example, MacIntyre points to Aquinas's reconciliation of faith and reason in the Middle Ages. Christianity absorbed Aristotelianism, in effect. Another communitarian, the American Michael Walzer, agrees that 'social critics commonly start from where they stand, win or lose on their own ground'. Only a few thin moral standards—against wanton cruelty, for instance—cut across cultures. Any more substantial ideals are bound to a place and a cultural tradition. One has to argue within a culture, not from some supposed universal vantage point above it.¹⁰ It bears noting that both MacIntyre and Walzer are staunch critics of much that ails the modern world, including the excesses of capitalism and the loss of community. They are natural allies for any traditionalist. Thus we have to take them seriously when they have doubts about a cosmopolitan strategy.

Moreover, they are not the only critics of liberal globalisation to reject universalism at the same time. In non-Western parts of the world, we run into even more strident defences of values bound to place and culture. This is understandable on some level as a psychological defence mechanism against persistent efforts by the West to impose its own norms on distant others. Even when everyone acknowledges the need to find common ground, how one goes about it matters a great deal, even if not for fully rational reasons. As explained by an international lawyer involved with the United Nations' promotion of intercivilisational dialogue, one must avoid the patronising impression that one part of the world has understood and mastered another part, either at the beginning or at the end of the process. Everyone involved must feel they fully own the vocabulary of dialogue, if they are to trust their interlocutors.¹¹

That said, this natural desire to be recognised as an equal partner of the West takes different forms in different contexts. Sometimes it goes beyond equality and undermines the cosmopolitan enterprise altogether. Take China, for example. Quite apart from the Communist Party's propaganda, many nationalistic intellectuals resent what they see as the global dominance of Western-produced and Western-oriented knowledge. They insist that much about China is unique and is thus poorly understood through a lens of universal values or universal social science.¹² When pressed, they often find it quite hard to put their finger on exactly what is supposed to be so different about China,

compared to any other rapidly modernising society. But the idea sticks. China's uniqueness becomes a bulwark against being explained by outsiders or being expected to conform to any standard that they have not made up themselves. To be understood would be to be mastered.

I have run into such insistent defences of China's uniqueness many times in person. For some years in Nanjing, I have taught a postgraduate seminar on modernity and world social thought. My students have been quite intelligent and often open to criticism of what has gone wrong with modernisation. Yet for many of them, the solution had to be culturally specific. The 'moral vacuum' that capitalism had brought to China could be filled satisfactorily only by something rooted in Chinese history and an identifiably Chinese heritage. Chinese solutions for Chinese people, in other words. They agreed in the abstract that the ethical vacuum might be similar all over the world, and that the several traditions might be saying similar things. But it would be deeply humiliating not to be able to rely only on oneself for inspiration. I often pointed out that they were selling Chinese civilisation short by taking such a defensive view of it. If Confucianism were valuable, then surely it was valuable for all human beings, just as the old Confucians had believed. Why could Confucianism not offer something to the world, and vice versa? Are we not all in the same boat?

One student told me in conversation that Confucianism was bound to Chinese people because it had arisen among them, and that one should not assume that all people everywhere were the same. Somehow the 'what' and the 'who' fit neatly together, whether we are talking about ideas or about some other cultural accomplishment. In the spring of 2010, a few weeks after that conversation, Chinese media covered a news story from South Korea. Apparently some Korean students were lobbying to reintroduce learning of Chinese characters in Korean education. These had largely been abandoned with the move to a different modern writing system. Since Chinese characters have long been a treasured marker of Chinese civilisation, we might expect such a move to be welcomed by anyone proud of being Chinese. On the Chinese news website, however, the posted comments had a very different tone. Many of them hurled vitriol at Koreans' 'claiming' such characters as part of their own heritage, because clearly they belonged to the Han Chinese race.¹³

This controversy parallels debates over so-called 'cultural property'. Usually the issue arises around whether ancient artefacts may be traded across borders. Two principled positions have emerged. The so-called 'cultural internationalist' view sees the products of ancient people as belonging to the human race

regardless of where they were made. Just as everyone has a duty to preserve them, so do we all have a right to enjoy them. The ‘cultural nationalist’ view insists instead that such artefacts are part of a national heritage—usually defined arbitrarily by present-day borders—and that nations have a primary right to retain control over them.¹⁴ When it comes to practical questions of how to keep physical objects accessible and to preserve them, one could come up with good arguments on either side. Perhaps location matters more sometimes, and high-tech storage matters more other times. Yet for the intangible and non-zero-sum legacies of a high culture—its ideas, literature, modes of virtuous living, and so on—a cultural nationalist view is constraining and distorting. It involves putting on blinders and ignoring the universal impulses that animated the tradition in the first place.

In some ways, all this is a disappointing regression to how people thought before the Axial Age. It amounts to saying that what is ours is valuable because it is ours, not because it is worthwhile for all human beings and we just happened to discover it first. This assumption runs deeply through modern Chinese political culture, reinforced through the education system. China is the only major country in the world, for example, where students are taught a theory of human evolution in which *homo sapiens* did not spread out of Africa and later adapt in superficial ways to different continents. Instead, they are told that earlier hominids such as *homo erectus* evolved separately, with only limited cross-flows of genes, in each region of the world. Critics have noted that such assumptions, at odds with mainstream theories, powerfully reinforce racial nationalism.¹⁵ If one believes that physical continuity of a people goes back tens of thousands of years, then it will be hard to imagine oneself as part of a single human story.

Walling oneself off has important consequences. For one thing, an exaggerated belief in unbridgeable cultural differences can be crippling. A psychological experiment once tested individuals who were deeply familiar with both Chinese and American cultures. First they were asked questions to assess how much they felt racial characteristics and behaviour were essentially different between the two countries. Then everyone was given tasks that required them to shift rapidly between cultural frameworks, and asked to talk about the experience of navigating two different cultures. The results were striking. The more a person believed in deep racial and cultural differences, the more difficulty he or she had in shifting frames quickly, and the more uncomfortable it was to talk about the experience of navigating different cultures.¹⁶ In short, the harder one thinks it is to bridge cultural differences, the more it becomes a self-

confirming prophecy.

Without intending it, such insistence on uniqueness also makes an easy target for liberal cosmopolitans. Over the last thirty years, many Chinese liberals, such as the dissident physicist Fang Lizhi, have pointed out the folly of such rhetoric. They note that it is often used by Beijing as an excuse to deflect criticism on human rights, but add that it cripples critical thinking in general. The alternative, in their view, is quite obvious. Fang Lizhi has argued that since science and democracy are universal standards, China should embrace a liberal model just as the West did earlier.

The spirit of science and reason and realism are bridging the gulf between faiths, dissolving the barriers between systems, tearing down the barbed-wire fences along borders. There is a tide in today's world, a rising tide of peace, democracy, reason, and tolerance.¹⁷

Framed this way, liberal cosmopolitanism has the momentum of history behind it.

Real alternatives get drowned out along the way. This bears stressing because it comes down to a choice among three positions, not two. First, one can be a liberal cosmopolitan of the sort who wants to get along with others, amid the varied spicery of life. In practice, such ideas are tightly bound up with the forces of consumerist globalisation. Second, one can be some sort of defensive nationalist or relativist. That means regressing to a pre-universalist mindset in which beliefs are inseparable from whatever group holds them. If one pays attention to today's loudest voices, it would seem that these are the only two choices. Between them, liberal cosmopolitanism is winning in the long run because it can speak to all people everywhere.

But there is a third standpoint suggested by the trajectory I traced in the first half of this book. Deep cosmopolitanism is a project bridging all civilisations but beholden to none. It is hardly a modern Western manifesto. From time to time, I meet some of the more insular 'traditionalists', in China or elsewhere, who assume that given my background, any talk of universalism must mask an imperial imposition. Given the experience of the last two centuries, I can understand the reflex to tar all with the same brush. But it misses the mark when the content of deep cosmopolitanism is so at odds with West-centred liberal globalisation. Deep cosmopolitanism is as much about saving the West from what it has done to itself as it is about urging other civilisations to refine

common language for talking about common problems. Indeed, while a minority of deep cosmopolitans do survive in the West, the modern West as a whole may have surprisingly little to contribute to a genuine global conversation. It is something of an aberration in history, a twisting of the more hopeful strand that ran from Aristotle through Cicero to Aquinas and Ricci.

The task, then, is to resume the global conversation that modernity rudely interrupted. It might not seem easy to do so, since that interruption bludgeoned our several conversationalists on the head and left them all reeling. But if they gather their wits and again sit down together, it may turn out that the blow did no lasting damage. It may have jarred some comfortable assumptions and allowed them to gather their thoughts anew. Perhaps modernity, despite itself, has opened up room for traditionalists to work together and respond to it. We saw in the earlier cosmopolitan moments that breakthroughs required some awareness of what I called crystallisation: knowing that one's own way of life embodied truths but was not truth itself, and that the same truths might crystallise in other ways. Because modernisation has disrupted so much of the old civilisations, we now have the flexibility to rethink, in conversation with one another, how those age-old truths might crystallise anew.

A twenty-first century revival of deep cosmopolitanism has two stages. First, we must think through what it means to uphold a tradition and on what basis we might share traditions and bring them together. Second, we must imagine how that vision might grow teeth and reshape globalisation in our time.

Where might we look for ways to revive the traditions? One obvious strategy is to start where traditions were absorbed in the past: through education. Pre-modern education focused on a written tradition of high culture. Mastered in youth, it shaped the thinking of people of influence in later life. Since the style of education has changed so drastically in recent generations, we easily forget that an emphasis on the classics survived well into the modern era, even while society at large was losing its moorings. The English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead's famous 1929 essay on 'The Place of the Classics in Education' encapsulated the reasoning behind it. Reading Latin literature exposed students to precise and rigorous language, as well as the Roman roots of European civilisation. It also offered vivid examples of virtue in the figures of ancient history.¹⁸ This was the logic of traditional education all over the world: refine logic and ethical reasoning, acquaint students with a tradition, and flesh out an image of virtue. It was crystallised in a cultural context, but also spoke truth as such.

When some traditionalists today urge reviving the ‘great books’, they keep parts of this older reasoning while dropping other parts of it. The curricular debates that intensified in the West after the 1980s have been a minefield of arguments about modernity, culture, and truth. Often traditionalists have hoped that by having students read the ‘great books’, they can push back against the trend of narrow professional specialisation, in which learning serves only to get a credential and then a high-paying job. Even a bit more attention to the canon of literature and philosophy might revive some of the older character-forming aims of education.

At the same time, though, the ‘great books’ advocates also rely heavily on a second reason, which they call cultural literacy. They complain that modern students simply do not know enough about their own heritage. From this angle, the point of reading the canon is to pass on the European intellectual tradition that goes continuously back to Plato. Some advocates have even said that that tradition is valuable because it is a common touchstone among Westerners, not because its content is ultimately truer than any other tradition elsewhere in the world.¹⁹ It is quite easy to slide from the cultural literacy argument back into the pre-Axial Age obsession with what is ours rather than with what speaks to humanity. That way lies a tribalised ‘little West’.

Unsurprisingly, the idea that the European canon matters because it is ours also provokes much of the resistance against it. If the main argument for the great books is that they represent a shared heritage, then those who feel they do not share that heritage have no reason to read them. In the debate over core curriculum reform at Stanford University in the late 1980s, for example, opponents of the canon said it represented ‘dead white males’. The prominent African-American scholar Henry Louis Gates suggested that those who wanted to go back to the great books were merely nostalgic for the society they used to dominate. Such a revival of the old high culture would be, he feared, ‘the return of an order in which my people were the subjugated, the voiceless, the invisible, the unrepresented and the unrepresentable’.²⁰ Cultural literacy crashes head-on into relativism. Both sides, perhaps without realising it, agree that civilisation is the property of a group.

Western conservatives respond unevenly to this objection. Perhaps the closest in spirit to the old high culture was the University of Chicago philosopher Allan Bloom. In his influential 1987 book *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom argued that the classics were the best avenue of access to tradition that modern young people have. Where cultural relativists long to undermine conventions,

the classics are about searching for a higher truth that is not culture-bound.²¹ So far, so good. But conservatives of this bent pay at most lip service to the non-European classics, mainly as a counterpoint to those, such as Gates, who complain the canon excludes ethnic minorities. The conservative intellectual Dinesh D'Souza, for example, observed that student activists calling for a more multicultural curriculum did not really want to include the classics of China, India, and the Muslim world. They wanted to read works narrowly tailored to the concerns of ethnic minorities within the West. Notably, D'Souza and company did not go on and call for including the non-European classics. He said that it would be unrealistic to expect university undergraduates, for example, to understand such alien traditions. They should focus more realistically on the European heritage of the societies in which they live. 'The study of other cultures can never compensate for a lack of thorough familiarity with the founding principles of one's own culture.'²² Again, such advocates fall back on civilisation as familiar cultural property.

Even when the great books proponents take universal truth seriously, as did Bloom, their curiosity about other civilisations remains dismayingly limited. This is not just civilisational arrogance, though the legacy of European dominance in the world probably imprints their thinking more than they care to admit. In the late 1940s, Toynbee remarked that the West ironically remained the most parochial of civilisations. Its technological edge over other civilisations had forced the latter into a single world arena, such that they had no choice but to accept the end of their own centrality. In contrast, Westerners still suffered from the illusion that only their own history really affected them, though Toynbee predicted that their descendants would take a broader view.²³ Two generations later, I suspect the great books enthusiasts have been slower than some in coming to see themselves as part of a decentred world.

A deeper reason has to do with confidence and status. Those who advocate most strongly for the European canon are those who know it intimately, from long study over the years. They are often, like Bloom, accomplished intellectuals in the philosophical and literary fields. Their authority and prestige derive from what they have mastered. To engage other traditions would mean stepping on to uncertain ground that others know better. And if we look further down the social scale, to those who put more emphasis on core cultural literacy than on the truth-seeking aspirations of the European tradition, then this celebration of the canon looks like a drawing of boundaries around one's own group. When a civilisation is cultural property, common shareholders control the company.

This lack of interest in the universal message of civilisations also reflects a change in how intellectuals see their own role. Even as early as the 1920s, the French traditionalist Julien Benda lamented modern intellectuals' disregard of truth. Instead, they had started writing apologies for one or another interest, be it class or nation or race.²⁴ Likewise, MacIntyre's call to revive traditional modes of argument is partly a response to what he calls 'emotivism', the use of moral language to press emotional buttons and assert one's own tastes, rather than because one thinks it a tool for reasoning about truth.²⁵ He confines himself to arguing within just one tradition, as we have seen, but the lament about modern intellectual culture hits the mark.

Unlike the Western traditionalists, intellectuals of a more liberal or postmodernist flavour think that the point of reading across cultures is not to represent group or personal interests but to unmask and discredit orthodoxy. Much like those anthropologists who reduce culture to perspective, many liberal cosmopolitan intellectuals say the point of learning about other traditions is mainly to disrupt one's own, by questioning 'the unexamined feeling that one's own preferences and ways are neutral and natural'. A more multicultural curriculum will instil a 'cosmopolitan sensibility'. It would treat humanity's diverse heritage as a 'dynamic amalgam', as fodder for 'participatory inquiry'.²⁶ Unlike the deep cosmopolitans of the past, however, proponents of that approach stop there. They would not have us disrupt our tradition in order to discover a new one, or to pierce through to something that transcends all of them. Instead, they imagine that feeling the cultural ground shift under our feet will improve us by giving us vertigo.

This cosmopolitanism of vertigo often lies behind occasional efforts today, by a handful of Western intellectuals, to study non-Western thought. Much of the move to broaden the canon of political thought to include India, the Muslim world, and China is along these lines. The postmodernist philosopher Fred Dallmayr, for example, has argued for 'reciprocal questioning' between Indian and Western—particularly Continental—thought. But he writes that such dialogue would not aim at finding any metaphysical common ground. Each tradition is the product of its own mythmaking. The most we can do is borrow some humanising myths from one another, always being careful to avoid imposing our own mental categories on others. His colleague, political theorist Roxanne Euben, does much the same with Islamic thought. We cannot have universal answers, she says, and even universal questions probably do not reveal anything deeper in human nature. We can hope only to understand an alien

system of thought better, to make the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ more permeable, and thus to encourage mutual tolerance.²⁷

Apart from a suspicion of truth-seeking, these attempts at dialogue among (what is left of) civilisations suffer from a further problem. They see dialogue as happening between civilisations as wholes. Take political psychologist Ashis Nandy, one of the few Indian intellectuals today to be widely read outside India. He describes himself quite promisingly as a ‘critical traditionalist’ who dislikes much of secular modernity but also looks askance at the bloodletting by Hindu nationalists. He has made dialogue among civilisations one of his touchstones. But when he goes on to explain what such dialogue means, he starts with the premiss that ‘a culture is an interconnected whole’. Picking and choosing only parts would be like going to a ‘grocery store’. ‘A dialogue of visions must be first a statement against uniformity.’²⁸ Moreover, much like the Western post-modernists, Nandy worries about imposing mental categories from one culture on another. Dialogue should aim at mutual respect and breaking down a sharp distinction between insiders and outsiders. It should not aim at any conclusions or synthesis.

If these reservations were merely about humility or avoiding intellectual aggression, they would probably do more good than harm. But taking a holistic view of traditions makes dialogue more difficult. If a culture is hard to disentangle from itself, then we are very likely to see it as also entangled with the people who happen to represent it. To talk as human beings interested in truths, we have to regard truths as something more than the property of a group, with all the sensitivities that such ownership entails. Moreover, as we saw earlier, any civilisation has layers. Mapping parallel ideas across civilisations, so we can talk about them, is difficult if all practices and propositions are tied up with one another and stamped with the name of a place and a people. The only dialogue true to the old civilisations is not a dialogue of wholes, of apples and oranges. It is a dialogue of correspondences, where apples and apples produce cider in the long run.

Past cosmopolitan moments as in the 1500s followed this approach. They meant talking about specific shared virtues, specific spiritual experiences, and the like. They did not just marvel at differences when Europe met China or Islam met Hinduism. Indeed, it was men such as Maigrot and Badā’ūnī who fought mightily against such cosmopolitanism. They protested that each civilisation was a unified whole in order to protect their own turf.

What might a dialogue of correspondences look like today? In substance, it

would be as it ever was, though few people nowadays do anything like it. One scholar who has done something like this on a modest scale is Lee H Yearley, in a comparative study of the ideas of Aquinas and Mencius. He dug below ‘real but thin’ resemblances to look closely at whether the virtues these two philosophers described were really analogous to one another. This meant going into how the virtues fitted together, how human impulses came out in society, and so on. He did not end up arguing that the two worldviews were ultimately the same. He found both important differences and inspiring parallels, just as any deep cosmopolitan centuries ago would have done. Moreover, Yearley is a fine example of someone who takes seriously how to compare traditions, because he has also reflected on how to teach comparative religion. He said that he started teaching the subject in the 1970s much the same way any ‘bourgeois relativist’ professor would, highlighting all the unbridgeable differences among religions. Then he came to his senses about the message this sent to his students. He revamped his class to focus on common questions and to give students a better tool kit for making moral judgements, instead of just surveying the world’s diversity.²⁹

I mention this example because, while just one modest experiment, it does show that a serious cosmopolitan treatment of thinkers is just as possible today as it used to be. It also shows that one can bring thinkers together for a variety of purposes. They can dazzle us with all their differences. They can wrestle with each other on behalf of the honour of a collectivity and its descendants. Or, if we want to be more serious, we can take from them useful lessons for any human being anywhere with a conscience.

Concretely, what a curriculum oriented to the great traditions, in the spirit of deep cosmopolitanism, would look like remains to be seen. It is the sort of thing that could only take shape in multiple experiments by sympathetic educators all over the world. Such experiments could be very modest at the outset, perhaps as specific modules added into existing curricula at the secondary or university level, or in short-term programmes. A network among those experiments could also share best practices and help them gain momentum. Often the participants would not meet one another directly, but sometimes they would do so, at conferences or in exchange programmes. Some educational experiments could even bring together youth from different civilisations and teach them the works of Cicero, Xunzi, al-Fārābī, and others, not as heritage, not as collective possessions, but as bearers of placeless and overlapping insights.

In the long run, the vision on the educational front would be to form a critical

mass of young cosmopolitans who have all read a global ‘great books’ canon and discussed it seriously as a guide to contemporary life. Without micromanaging, it is possible on many small fronts to create the conditions for such an encounter of traditions and a cross-cultural renaissance. Exposure to parallel ideas across cultures might even generate a certain *esprit de corps* among those educated along such lines. The more demanding the model of self-cultivation, and the more it is brought alive as a guide to the challenges facing the aspiring world citizen, the more attractive it is likely to be to the young with ambition. Can we imagine a world in which it is taken for granted that an intellectually talented Congolese teenager can read the *Bhagavad Gita* on an equal footing with a brahmin teenager from Varanasi? Can we imagine that it should matter similarly to them in their later careers, even if one ends up working in Mongolia and the other in Morocco? To split the content of the traditions from place and people in that sense would mean to have come back full circle to the spirit of the Axial Age. Wisdom again would speak to human beings as such.



All Religions Temple in Kazan, Russia, 2008.

11 Interreligious Dialogue and Its Limits

If the great traditions do contain some overlapping truths, as I suggested in the previous chapter, then we have to say more about what manner of truths they are. One view would be simply that they come out of common experience, and that they have been tested over time to fit human nature. But the most ardent defenders of any of these traditions will insist that it has some roots in a deeper spiritual reality. Since so many of the great traditions are explicitly religious, a deep cosmopolitanism in this century will have to take religion seriously. It will have to make a case for why religious believers from different parts of the world, with different doctrines, should make common cause. I acknowledge at the outset that this will not be an easy or obvious case to make. But it is precisely because it is rather difficult that I need to confront it head-on here.

Now from one sort of secular perspective, we should not have to take religion seriously at all so late in the game. For many decades, the expectation in the intellectual mainstream was that religion's importance would shrink as the world modernised. The so-called 'secularisation thesis' of the mid-twentieth century had strong and weak versions. The strong version held that religious belief would decline in general as living standards rose, people felt more secure, and science explained more and more of human experience. The weak version took no stand on what would happen to private belief. It merely predicted that the public importance of religion would decline. States would lose their religious colouring and become neutral, and people would confine religious opinions to private life. The political and social weight of religion would be diminished, in other words.¹

History has a habit of surprising those who make predictions. Not long after the peak of the secularisation thesis in the 1950s, religion roared back with a vengeance. So-called fundamentalist movements surged up in the 1970s and 1980s, especially in the Muslim world and in the United States, with strong political agendas. Even in private life, the number of believers levelled off and

then began rising again. Often the grandchildren of secular nationalists became pious firebrands. In raw numbers, traditionalists of a religious bent are probably the single largest demographic and political bloc in the world today. They might make up as much as a quarter or a third of the world population. Given the demographic trend of the religious having more children than the secular, they will probably grow further in coming decades.² Yet equally striking is that despite much visible agitation, religious traditionalists punch far below their weight. This is because they are so fragmented. Fundamentalists from different traditions have little good to say about one another, and tend to come to blows when in proximity. Why this is so, and whether it has to be, will be a live political question bedeviling any cosmopolitan effort in our time.

This problem cuts across religious fundamentalisms as well as mere nationalisms. But we would do well to look much more carefully at the religious aspect of the problem. For one thing, religious traditionalists really should know better. A nationalist does not pretend to be anything other than a prophet of place and blood. Anyone invoking religion, however, appeals to something by nature universal. Spiritual truth demands from us a level of consistency and intellectual honesty that chauvinism on behalf of a group does not. We thus have more hope of arguing with a religious traditionalist. There is something to explain, if only because the defensiveness contrasts so starkly with the older outreach to humanity.

For a liberal cosmopolitan, of course, all this should be a non-issue. It should not be necessary to find common ground among religious traditionalists, *as* religious traditionalists. Rather, in the liberal view, religious traditionalists will become more tolerant by becoming something other than religious traditionalists. The more globalisation advances, the more liberals expect religious fanaticism to soften. ‘There is no possibility of returning to authenticity’, claimed two critics of Hindutva, ‘as all religious traditions have been hybridised.’³ If the faithful come across enough diversity in daily life, their hostility to those of other or no faith will evaporate. This is at once a social, psychological, and political transformation. Socially, it will become impossible to recreate the self-contained religious universe that the fanatics desire. Psychologically, believers will begin to think differently about their own beliefs. At the outset, they passively accept religious conventions and are hostile to outsiders. Then they become more thoughtful and shift the focus inward to personal commitment rather than social conformity. At last, they appreciate their interconnectedness with others and dwell less on differences. Politically, modern

liberal citizens learn to leave their beliefs at home and see one another only as individuals.⁴

In general, this liberal way of resolving religious conflict has little to do with the *content* of what people believe. It has to do with *how* they believe it, and the way they think they should treat people who disagree. Yet the liberal project does sometimes touch on content and imply some reworking of religion from within. Many theologians of liberal temper have said in recent decades that they welcome the more intense encounter of world religions because it challenges some old assumptions.

One of the most well known Christian theologians to reflect on religious pluralism in recent decades was John Hick. He said that because we cannot experience the divine directly, any religion is filtered through historical and cultural contexts: Yahweh, the Trinity, Brahman, and so on. An awareness of religious diversity should humble us, particularly when it comes to ‘exclusivist’ claims that Christianity alone is true.⁵ Pluralists of this sort are uncomfortable with the idea that God would choose to favour specific times and places in history by intervening via direct revelation. Why a dusty corner of Palestine or the Hejaz? Other theologians in this vein suggest that today’s exposure of Christianity to other religions will spark a rethinking as important as when it spread through the Greco-Roman world.⁶ Postmodernism of a sort permeates this brand of theology, too. If spirituality is mediated through language and history, then truth must be somewhat subjective and shift over time. From that perspective, the goal is not to dig down to the common source of all faiths as Abū’l-Faḥr or Nicholas of Cusa tried to do. For today’s pluralist theologians, whatever unites religions is much more shapeless. Some reduce it to little more than a human religious impulse or experience of creativity.⁷

Because countries of Christian heritage have been most exposed to liberal and postmodern thinking, this reinterpretation has gone furthest in Christianity. But parallel reworkings of Islam have also been attempted. Some liberal Muslims try to defang fundamentalism by reinterpreting the Qur’ān. They pick the more tolerant verses, usually from the Mecca rather than Medina phases of Muḥammad’s prophethood, to conform Islam to liberal sensibilities. Other thinkers more influenced by postmodernism, such as the Indian Muslim (and now avowed atheist) Akeel Bilgrami, take a more radical approach. They urge ‘moderate Muslims’ to recast their beliefs along more ‘negotiable’ and ‘functional’ lines. Then they will be able to challenge the fundamentalists within Islam on their own terrain. According to this line of reasoning, religion is not

‘codifiable’. What it means to be a Muslim will evolve ‘as historical contexts lapse’.⁸ In effect, the postmodernists are eerily like the chauvinists in reducing tradition to cultural property. But while the chauvinists do so to fend off criticism, the postmodernists do so to make it easier to adapt faith to the imperatives of the time.

To be sure, these efforts at reinterpretation often stem from a well-intentioned desire for peace. When theologians such as Hick argue against Christian ‘exclusivism’, and when liberal Muslims find tolerant verses in the Qur’ān, they are often doing battle against the worst xenophobia and aggression. A deep cosmopolitan would certainly share their desire for cooperation on a host of practical global problems such as relieving poverty and preventing carnage. Take the Palestinian philosopher Ismā’īl al-Fārūqī, who urged Muslims and Christians to focus on their common ethical commitments, rather than on theological disputes, ‘tinged with the particularism of space-time’, about Muḥammad and Jesus. Or consider the South African activist Farid Esack. He got Muslims and non-Muslims to work together against apartheid, based on the solidarity of the oppressed and partly inspired by liberation theology. And the political thinker and anti-nuclear activist David J Krieger proposed Hindu–Christian dialogue based on a shared commitment, Gandhian in flavour, to fighting for justice on the emerging global terrain.⁹

Many of these would-be alliances would do more good than harm. As a way to think about how traditions meet, however, this approach will not get us very far. The goals these thinkers and activists share are fairly uncontroversial among well-meaning people troubled by human suffering. They get their energy from that sentiment, not mainly from religious commitments. Indeed, often they seem to put the cart before the horse. They want to fight injustice and need allies to do so. If the allies are of another faith, then obviously the barriers dividing them have to come down. Whatever theological reasoning will lower those barriers is thus desirable. Eroding the high walls among religions too easily turns into washing away the content within them, however. Since the motive largely comes from outside religion, this sort of religious reasoning is rather shapeless. It happens on the level of bedrock humanity. Even when it does not merge fully into liberal cosmopolitanism, it still ends up thrashing about without taking a stand on the broader direction of the modern world. Having religious motives and taking a stand need not mean vitriol against outsiders, any more than it did for deep cosmopolitans in the past. But it does mean being able to take firm positions on why truth matters.

For a deeper kind of encounter, we must look elsewhere. One prospect is those thinkers who, because they start interreligious dialogue from within a tradition, pay more attention to content. This means efforts to find common ground on the level of what I earlier called propositions. The most prominent such dialogue in recent years is the Catholic Church's efforts to mend fences with Muslims and Jews. Since the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, the Church has moved away from claiming that only its own members are saved. Its many documents on dialogue with other faiths insist that it 'rejects nothing of what is true and holy' in them. Since all human beings have an innate yearning for God, other faiths are rightly oriented even if still incomplete compared to Christianity. Some Catholic statements even suggest that non-Christians can be saved anonymously by Christ, without ever having heard of Christianity. While still 'Christocentric', this view of salvation is not 'ecclesiocentric', as it was when the Church claimed a unique gatekeeping role for itself.¹⁰

That evolving position has several implications. First, it means that the Catholic Church today affirms religious liberty and freedom of conscience more than it used to do. Second, it stresses the universality of Christian teaching but also looks carefully at how Christianity can be 'inculturated' in diverse societies. To convert is not to Europeanise, as it might have been a few centuries ago. Third, the obvious point of contact with other religious traditions is propositions that they have in common. The official 1992 'Catechism of the Catholic Church' thus underlines what Christianity shares with Judaism and Islam: monotheism, the Creation, the Last Judgement, roots in the Abrahamic heritage, and so on. That line of reasoning has been developed more fully by Maurice Borrmans, a Sorbonne-educated Catholic priest who was long the leading expert on dialogue with Muslims. His writings have called for focusing on areas of theological agreement such as the nature of God and prophecy.¹¹

Some Muslim thinkers have been reaching out in the other direction. Islamic tradition has many intellectual resources on which to draw for dialogue with Christianity and Judaism, since it considers them to stem from earlier prophets. The Lebanese Shi'ite scholar Muḥammad Hassan al-Amīn and the Tunisian thinker Fawzī Badawī, for example, emphasise unity rather than division. All revealed religions acknowledge the unity of God and come from a continuous line of prophets. Their adherents should be more tolerant of one another than in centuries past, particularly since now they are all up against the new paganism of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.¹² Much as with the Catholic impetus to dialogue, the common ground here is the content of beliefs. Both sides also insist, when it

comes down to it, that their own faith offers a more complete account of the truth at which other faiths can only hint.

Most such dialogue has been between Christians and Muslims. They are the most likely pairing to focus on matching up theological claims. Indeed, both sides often give the impression that they are more interested in a one-to-one conversation than in drawing in other world religions as well. Yet we do find some thinkers who deal with other dyads. The Spanish-Indian theologian Raimundo Panikkar argued for common ground between Christianity and Hinduism. He did not see them meeting mainly at the level of ideas, however. For Panikkar, the overlap is at a deeply personal, even existential level of experience, 'in the depths of the dark and yet more sure knowledge where both spiritualities can meet'. That said, a lot of Panikkar's comparison does involve analogies of content. He considered Hinduism 'a kind of Christianity in potency', with legitimate sacraments that foreshadow Christ.¹³ Other thinkers have found slightly different ways to bring Hinduism and Christianity together. Many liken the Christian incarnation to the Hindu avatar, the physical manifestation of God as a human being.¹⁴

There is also a third approach to dialogue, different both from the amorphous quasi-liberal desire to solve global problems and from the point-by-point cross-mapping of theologies. This third approach sees cooperation among religions happening in one or another specific society, based on a broadly shared way of life. Ṭāriq Ramaḍān, a Swiss Muslim political thinker and the grandson of Muslim Brotherhood founder al-Bannā, makes such an argument in Europe. He urges Muslims in the West to overcome their sense of distance from mainstream Western society. If they focus on the universality of Islam as a religion rather than as a culture, then they can be Westerners and Muslims at the same time. Concretely, this means engaging non-Muslims as fellow citizens and getting fully involved in civic life where they live. Indeed, Ramaḍān thinks Muslims in the West can play a vital role as the 'voice of the voiceless', with a more global perspective on injustice. They should see themselves as full citizens of Western democratic society, bound by its rules except in some exceptional cases of conscience.¹⁵

Similar arguments have cropped up elsewhere in the Muslim world, among people of diverse political persuasions. A liberal Pakistani Muslim, Riffat Hassan, makes the case in South Asia. She holds that Islam and Hinduism have long imprinted each other on the subcontinent and are 'rooted in a common culture'. Thus Muslims and Hindus can cooperate on day-to-day ethical

problems without having to talk about abstruse theology. And even some staunch Islamists in Sudan and Lebanon have said that their future political vision would respect religious minorities based on a common nationality and equal citizenship.¹⁶ In all these instances, cooperation is based not on abstract propositions but on the shared experience of living in a given society.

I do not doubt that one can find real common ground based either on theological overlaps—such as between Christianity and Islam—or on the experience of living in a specific part of the world. Unfortunately, however, both those modes of dialogue are inherently self-limiting. Let us revisit the layers of identity and difference that I mapped out earlier in this book, shown again in [Table 11.1](#).

Practices are the most bound to a place or a group. People of different faiths in the same setting—be it the very old cultures of South Asia or a modern nation-state in Europe—might share clusters of practices. In the same way, Christians and Muslims might share some specific theological propositions among the many that make up each religious system. Neither set of overlaps will get us very far, however. A common culture among Punjabis or among Swiss citizens would be meaningless to Moroccans or Mongolians, just as common ideas between Christians and Muslims will not be enough to draw in Buddhists or Confucians.

A lot of the proposition-based dialogue also suffers from a lack of ambition. To be sure, it gives some intellectual reasons to tolerate people of other faiths, and perhaps to work together on pressing social problems. Yet in the end, it is a rather low-risk way to reach out. All parties stand on the ground they already occupy and make some generous noises about each other. They are not expected to reflect seriously on their own traditions, apart from downplaying the aspects most hostile to outsiders. Moreover, such dialogue has a very abstract air about it. Some believers do live their faith on that intellectual plane. Among them, such conversations may be stimulating enough. Most people, however, do not see the world that way. If they are going to do any cosmopolitan rethinking, they want something real to motivate it. Dialogue has to offer them something new, something personally experienced, something with implications for their own lives.

Table 11.1 Four levels of a tradition or culture

| |
|------------------|
| <i>practices</i> |
| |

| |
|-------------------------|
| <i>propositions</i> |
| <i>ethoses</i> |
| <i>bedrock humanity</i> |

Where else might we turn? In light of some of the cosmopolitan moments covered in the first half of this book, another strategy might suggest itself. When we left Abū'l-Faḥr, he was trying to pierce through to the inspiration that lies beneath all religions. He thought that the point of dialogue was to reveal a whole greater than the sum of its parts, at least for the discerning few who could appreciate it.

In modern times, the closest thing to Abū'l-Faḥr's cosmopolitanism has been 'perennialism', or 'perennial philosophy'. At first glance, it might seem like a promising way for traditions to meet. The term 'perennial philosophy' was popularised by the English writer Aldous Huxley in his 1945 book by the same name, though the idea goes back centuries. As Huxley explained it, perennial philosophy is the truth that recurs in all religions and is best accessed via contemplation and mysticism. This same esoteric universalism was also called 'the transcendent unity of religions' by the German-French perennialist Frithjof Schuon. Perennialists believe that the vertical divisions among religions matter far less than the horizontal line cutting across them, which separates the exoteric meaning for the many from the esoteric meaning for the few. For ordinary people, exoteric religion is made concrete in rituals and practices. Esoteric spirituality is of a higher order, the province of an elite who can see past different traditions. Schuon added that interreligious dialogue, as it is often understood, usually aims at the wrong level altogether. The World Parliament of Religions, for example, treats religion only as exoteric, which in his view misses where real universality lies.¹⁷

Perennialism has a certain logical coherence, to be sure. It also has an avowedly universalistic outlook that can bridge all traditions without reducing them to the lowest common denominator. In the writings of one famous early twentieth-century perennialist, René Guénon, we can also see why some intellectuals critical of the modern world find it compelling. Guénon was an eccentric character, born to a French Catholic family but curious about Sufism and Hinduism. He described his worldview as 'traditionalist' in a very specific sense. He thought that all traditions contained valuable truth that had come under threat in the materialistic modern world. He looked eastward to Asia because he

felt the essence of tradition was more fully preserved there than in modern Europe. Later in life he became a Muslim and settled in Egypt. He even described his conversion in a peculiar way. Since he insisted on the esoteric core common to all faiths, becoming a Muslim was for him no more than 'moving into' a different tradition. Perennialism involved a project of revolution as well. Guénon believed that a core spiritual elite had to rediscover traditional wisdom from around the world and lead a renaissance, a backlash against rampant materialism.¹⁸

It is easy to see the appeal of perennialism. It offers a clear account of where to look in the various religious traditions and how to bring them into contact. It also maps out the fault lines of the modern world and gives would-be perennialists a role in waging a cultural battle. I also have no doubt that perennialism could succeed in gaining ground on some fronts. There are surely enough malcontents to form a critical mass and open up the traditions to each other. Many deep cosmopolitans in the past foreshadowed something along those lines. If this were all that was needed, then our course of action would be clear: perennialists should lead the way into a fourth-order universalism, and try to construct a syncretic world civilisation that merges all traditions with themselves at the centre.

For obvious reasons, this is not going to happen. While perennialists might be creative, and while they might have some role to play at the junction of traditions, perennialism simply will not resonate with most people. What binds perennialists together—a certain esoteric conceit about seeing through all traditions—also cuts them off from more orthodox traditionalist intellectuals and activists, not to mention the vast majority of ordinary people.

When it comes to misgivings about perennialism, I am not even speaking of the more insular sorts who like to hurl vitriol at the infidels. Take someone as imaginative and as charitable as the prolific English writer and devout Catholic G K Chesterton in the early twentieth century. He looked askance at the religious pluralists of his own generation, many of whom urged a rather shapeless opening of Christianity to other faiths on the grounds that they were all really the same. Chesterton urged them to look back at ancient Rome right before Christianity. That flourishing and cosmopolitan empire had reached a kind of cultural and spiritual exhaustion, he argued, because it trusted only in human wisdom. It had all manner of myths and esoteric spiritualities on offer, and a climate of tolerance among them. They all merged in 'one lukewarm liquid in that great pot of cosmopolitan corruption'. In a barbed comparison with his own time,

Chesterton remarked that ‘the whole world once very nearly died of broadmindedness and the brotherhood of all religions.’ The ancients were saved only because Christianity burst on to the scene with stark moral clarity and a call from beyond the world.¹⁹

Many pious Christians fear that perennialists and other religious cosmopolitans miss the point in just this way. They say that Christians should celebrate the ‘scandal of particularity’—the incarnation of God in one time and place—rather than trying to swamp it in abstractions and equivalences. All the theological propositions in different traditions collapse when salvation breaks through, against all odds, in the person of Christ. Some observers suggest that in this respect, Christianity has a bigger stumbling block to reaching out ecumenically than any other religion does.²⁰ That need not be so. Many other religions also emphasise particular figures and moments in history, which cannot be turned into universal abstractions. But the more general point holds. Most religions move their adherents because they are unique, not because they are one among many branch offices representing the divine.

The orthodox have a variety of reasons to insist on uniqueness. Some of those reasons are more worldly than others. In a few instances, uniqueness and difference are less about truth than about one’s place in society. Acknowledging the worth of other faiths might undercut one’s own authority.²¹ Yet such ‘unmasking’ of interests is too easy, and it ill fits sincere believers such as Chesterton. Their resistance has more to do with how one can best access truth.

We might think of the debate between the orthodox and the perennialists in the following way. Imagine standing in a room partitioned down the middle by an opaque sheet with holes in it. Rays pour through the holes from a mysterious light source on the other side. As a curious soul, you are intrigued by what the light is and what else is behind the sheet. The orthodox voice in one ear will tell you to go right up to the curtain, put one eye against one hole, and peer through patiently to find out. The perennialist voice in the other ear will say quite the opposite. Step as far back as possible and squint so you can see through all holes at once, with a more three-dimensional sense of what is going on behind the sheet. You might even notice where the hooks holding up the sheet are, so you can dislodge it and bring it cascading down on the head of someone peering through with one eye. The orthodox will reply that standing back so far will reveal little, and probably only give you eye-strain from struggling to focus. Pick the biggest and best-positioned hole, line up your eye in front of it, and you will see everything at once.

Something like this is a frequent response to pleas for deep cosmopolitanism. A few years ago, I contributed to the American quarterly *Modern Age* an essay arguing for a cross-cultural alliance of traditionalists to meet liberal globalisation on its own scale. I noted the many ethical overlaps, as well as some forerunners of this cosmopolitanism in centuries past, though without arguing for anything as radical as perennialism. Three traditionalists, mostly from a Christian perspective, responded to my proposal. They were sympathetic to the critique of modernity that lay behind my call for a global alliance, saying I had ‘the right enemies’. Yet they were also uneasy about my downplaying the uniqueness of traditions. One response insisted that any love for the world as a whole had to pass through love for particular places and traditions. Another said that ‘[t]he view endorsed by Webb has a long and inauspicious history in Christian theology. For the first centuries the recalcitrant particularity of the Old Testament and the historical Jesus grated against the spiritualised universalism of finer minds.’ Christianity triumphed over Roman cosmopolitanism because, while speaking to everyone, it also said something very specific and striking. A third response suggested that dwelling on the common ground among faiths smacked of an ‘aristocratic liberalism’ that could decay into a shapeless ‘bourgeois liberalism’.²²

All those objections deserve taking seriously. While I think it imperative for traditionalists around the world to make common cause, I hardly propose that they do so around bland affirmations that slide into liberalism. Nor am I urging the creation of a perennialist vanguard that to the orthodox will reek of hubris or even something more sinister. The distinct religious and civilisational traditions do have a depth and vividness that would be lost if wholly merged. I do not pretend to know whether one can see through hol(e)y curtains best by peering with one eye through one hole, or by standing back and squinting. Yet I can appreciate, perhaps more than my *Modern Age* essay implied, all the reasons why someone might think truth can be grasped only by knowing one tradition very well.

We need a way to get the best of both worlds. On the one hand, we should respect the distinctiveness and coherence of each of the world’s religious traditions. For most people, they resonate in ways that cosmopolitanism cannot match. On the other hand, making common cause means articulating some common ground. For all the perennialists’ shortcomings, they do at least know where the traditions meet. They also have a compelling sense of mission to recover forgotten wisdom and do battle against the modern world in its name.

Can these two advantages be brought together? Can we have a non-perennialist cosmopolitanism that is robust enough to motivate an alliance but that does not alarm the orthodox at the same time? To understand what this might look like, let us revisit the room with the hol(e)y curtain. Imagine that we have several orthodox believers standing at the curtain, peering with one eye each through the holes that they have each chosen. While in that position, they will not be looking at each other, though they might be jousting verbally about which hole shows more of the light than others.

Now suppose that they all step back for a moment and turn to look behind them. As the light pours through the holes in the curtain, they will notice that it throws their shadows up against a hard, pale wall. Unlike the curtain, the wall lets nothing through it and is of no interest on its own. As they watch their shadows on the wall, however, they might notice that all the curtain-peerers have a similar physique. They would still disagree about what the light is and how best to see it, of course. But without the light falling on the wall, they would never have noticed anything similar about their own statures.

The hard, pale wall is the modern world.

I do not want to stretch the metaphor too far. But it does suggest where we can find some promising common ground. Arguing about how to look through curtains will get us nowhere. We have never agreed on an answer and are never likely to do so. Moreover, looking through curtain holes is a personal rather than a social pursuit. We cannot see light sources on one another's behalf. The blank wall is different. We can all see it at the same time, just as all traditions simultaneously confront a secular liberal cosmopolitanism that shows them little enthusiasm, and often active hostility.

When I say that the shadows on the wall have a similar stature, I refer to the qualities of character—the virtues, so to speak—that each of the traditions recommend and that their followers try to cultivate. Some of those qualities have to do with looking through the curtain: patience, concentration, and steadiness. Others have to do with bearing whatever other discomforts the room with the curtain and the blank wall might have. But they will be quite similar among the people in the room, regardless of the views they might hold on what lies behind the curtain. Everything we have seen in the first half of this book suggests that the character types in the old civilisations mirrored each other much more clearly than did the religious doctrines or customs.

Deep cosmopolitanism in our time must be character-centred in this way. It can leave practices intact, and can let the faithful mull over propositions within

each separate tradition, coming into dialogue across traditions no more than they feel inclined to do. The real point of contact, just as the examples centuries ago hinted, is at the level of ethos. Traditionalists around the world differ far less from one another at the level of character than they all differ, collectively, from the character now shown in ghastly silhouette by the neon lights of the global city. Whether or not they yet fully realise it, they are pushed together both by shrinking geography and by a common opponent. Today's challenge thus provides something missing in all the centuries we covered in the first half of this book. Deep cosmopolitans in the past had little to motivate them to reach out, apart from curiosity and goodwill. That is why there were so few of them and why they remained at the margins of each civilisation. Today, we at last have the missing motive: we are up against the wall.

I suspect this way of thinking about the problem and the solution is more likely to be widely understandable than any abstract theological comparison or any perennialist experiment. Of course, like any cosmopolitanism, it will appeal mostly to those of broad horizons and some education. The old civilisations were most universalistic at the top, as we have seen. A cosmopolitan style of self-cultivation, even within a tradition, could never be to everyone's taste. At first glance, it would have little to offer to folk more interested in living locally.

But, crucially, deep cosmopolitanism of this sort also would not outrage the less cosmopolitan version of each tradition. Perennialists, along with the liberal reinterpreters of traditions today, have an annoying habit of telling the orthodox and the locally minded that truth is something other than what they think it is. Character-centred cosmopolitanism would do something quite different. It would merely flesh out the similar stature—the parallel virtues—of those who set out to reclaim the world. We should be talking mainly about the character of traditionalists, not putting the propositions within traditions up against one another. This inherently offends less.

At this point, some might object that I have merely come full circle back to a kind of secularism, a separation between religious belief and the public sphere. But it would be misleading to conflate deep cosmopolitanism and secularism. It is true that any worldwide alliance of traditionalists must involve some layering, some separation, between their core religious beliefs and their political common ground. But such is not secularism, any more than observing our shadows on the blank wall means kissing that wall.

Why is this so? Secularism in general can mean a range of things. In the modern French, Turkish, and Chinese experiences, it has meant driving religion

out of the public sphere, disdaining it, and doing what one can to wipe it out in private life as well. In America, it has meant a wall of separation in which, while religion flourishes in society, the state must remain neutral and disentangled. And in India since independence, it has meant freedom of worship and non-favouritism, but still plenty of interaction between the state and religious institutions. Indeed, the Indian government often intervenes in religious disputes and subsidises religious bodies, even though it usually tries to do so evenhandedly. That is not because Indian elites generally have been sympathetic to religion—many of them are as liberal and agnostic as any Western yuppie—but because they have had to keep the peace in an overwhelmingly religious society.²³

To understand better the differences between deep cosmopolitanism and a more mainstream liberal secularism, let us turn to the ideas of the late American political theorist John Rawls. In his early 1990s writings on ‘political liberalism’, Rawls considered how to get citizens in a democratic society to respect one another as free and equal, despite ‘intractable’ moral disagreements. He and his disciples say citizens must check their private beliefs at the door when deciding political questions. Appeals based on religion and the like will be ‘inaccessible’ to others who take a different view. Political arguments can invoke only ‘public reasons’ such as rights, safety, health, economic growth, and other such goals that do not take too much for granted. As Rawls and his fellow travellers see it, political liberalism is not even about specific values, so much as a framework for people with different values to coexist. It is a kind of neutral machinery of mutual respect.²⁴

Political liberalism has become a dominant strand of thinking in Western academia. Even critics are often prodded to argue within a Rawlsian framework, perhaps tweaking some details rather than challenging it outright. On any broader view, however, this kind of theory has drawbacks that its proponents rarely want to acknowledge.

For one thing, political liberals put their arguments in what I elsewhere have called rather ‘ethereal’ language.²⁵ The norms of their political theory are supposed to be ‘above’ culture in a sense. They plead that the realities of lived liberalism in modern societies—the rampant consumerism, the disdain for tradition, the view among many that values are tastes rather than truths—have nothing to do with liberalism as a political framework. Such things just happen to be how some people have opted to fill the space of freedom. Yet all ideas have some connexion to experience. Political liberalism arose, and is most

popular, among the secular upper middle class at a certain historical moment. Were it truly neutral, then it might well have arisen among discerning people in the past who wanted to find common ground with others. Yet as we have seen, such people in earlier eras gravitated to something like deep cosmopolitanism instead.

While I make this observation from a traditionalist perspective, I am not alone in suspecting that political liberalism is less neutral than it claims to be. From the left, radical political theorist Romand Coles has compared the rhetoric of Rawlsian political liberalism to that of financial currency, a common medium of circulation. As with currency, political liberalism's abstractness conceals relations of power behind rules of the game that have been made up by those people who are in a position to do so.²⁶

The relationship between political liberalism and social forces is only part of the issue, however. Let us look more closely at other assumptions that political liberals tend to hold, in contrast to deep cosmopolitans. These come into starkest relief in matters of religion and public life, which have been the focus of this chapter. The two approaches draw boundaries in very different ways.

For political liberals, public deliberation that draws on religious ideas and other 'theories of the good' is a minefield at least of offence, and potentially even of violent conflict. According to this logic, it is better to talk about narrower things, about which one feels less strongly, than it is to express what really motivates one and thereby to rub everyone else the wrong way. For deep cosmopolitans, by contrast, it is better to go the heart of the issue and try to find common ground in those beliefs. Dialogue need not be comfortable to be worthwhile. Yet it is revealing to consider what happened in some emotionally charged debates of the past, such as the Jesuit–Confucian or 'Ibādat Khāna encounters. In such cases, the attempt at substantive dialogue across traditions does not mainly offend one's interlocutors. It causes the most discomfort to people from one's own tradition who, like Maigrot and Badā'ūnī, prefer that one not talk to the 'infidels' at all. In such cases, deep cosmopolitans were not coming to blows with each other; they were fighting a rear-guard battle most of the time.

I would argue that this is because one approaches dialogue very differently depending on how one views beliefs about truth. On the one hand, if one sees them as mere markers of identity, as emotionally laden expressions of one's selfhood, then talking about them can seem insulting all too quickly. Such is the political liberals' fear, in effect. On the other hand, if one sees beliefs about truth

as signposts to something that really is there—the common property of human beings as such—then conversations presuppose a basis for respect. Such has been deep cosmopolitans’ usual approach. More insular traditionalists objected to it because, in effect, it showed too much respect to the other side. Talking about truth is a sign of respect rather than disrespect, in the deep cosmopolitan view.

Yet in contrasting political liberalism and deep cosmopolitanism, I should also note a loose analogy between them, in form if not in content. This has to do with paying attention, in public life, to some layers of human experience but not to others. Political liberals base mutual respect on being free and equal citizens. This layer does not have much to it; it roughly corresponds to the minimal bedrock of human nature that I discussed in an earlier chapter. Political liberals then bracket the beliefs that those free and equal citizens variously hold as not being relevant to the liberal public space. This is a respect based on one layer of common ground, with other layers ignored.

In the account of deep cosmopolitanism that I developed a few pages ago, there is also a layering, though with very different content. The common ground across traditions does not involve bedrock human nature but rather analogous character types. There is much more going on, as it were. Believers from different faiths, for example, could recognise one another as cultivating similar virtues and as reacting to the global cultural landscape in similar ways. They would ignore, for political purposes, some of the metaphysical and other propositions that vary more widely across traditions. In my metaphor, they would be looking at their shadows on the pale wall, not talking about what they can see through the holes in the curtain.

The deep cosmopolitan approach thus has a few advantages over the political liberal approach. It admits a much richer array of commitments into the public conversation, and it allows that conversation to touch on the ingredients for human flourishing. It underpins real respect among traditionalists rather than mutual indifference. It amplifies the voices of those who feel strongly about truth rather than the voices of those who are wary of anyone feeling strongly about anything. As a practical matter, it also has more points of contact with the thinking of most human beings, who take their traditions seriously and do not want a fully neutral public sphere.

Less obvious, but just as important if one is dealing with the spirit of future large-scale global institutions, the deep cosmopolitan approach is compatible with liberty and a vigorous regard for conscience. For all the liberal protestations

about freedom, there is a growing tendency among liberals to reach into civil society to transform it along their own preferred lines. As the Catholic legal scholar Robert P George has argued, anti-discrimination and other principles are being used ever more ‘as cudgels against religious communities’.²⁷ First the state must be scrupulous about not passing judgement on values; then strong judgements in private life must be discouraged, too. The temptation of the secular new class is to advance from insisting on talking politically a certain way to assuming that the world of political talking overrides all other spaces.

In contrast, the deep cosmopolitan approach to layers of common ground is more self-limiting. It urges traditionalists to ally only enough to work together and offer a postliberal alternative. It need not get them to think alike on other matters properly confined to each separate tradition. It talks about the similar shadows thrown up against the blank wall, not about the light pouring through the curtain to produce them, even though it thinks the light very important. Thus it leaves individual conscience intact. Light causes shadows, not the other way around. Traditionalists might find enough agreement on *what* to build, and *how* to build it, even if they do not go into higher-level debates about *why* they each hold the underlying worldview. Each traditionalist’s motivation would come through a different hole in the curtain, not shared with most of his or her fellow citizens. Energy comes from beyond the mundane. Salvation is outside the state, and only outside the state.

Let us step back and consider what all this means. To match liberal globalisation and then supersede it is the project of crafting a true world civilisation. Its mandate has built-in limits. It would be religiously pluralistic and not try to overcome distinct traditions. At the same time, it would need a common global high culture that combines the best of the regional civilisations, such that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. One rough precedent is the old creative tension between Athens and Jerusalem, between the Greco-Roman virtues and Judaeo-Christian revelation. Those two poles combined in the synthesis of the High Middle Ages, though they did not wholly disappear. The resources of both traditions continued to speak to the human experience in different ways. We would do well to imagine the forging of a world civilisation in the same way. Mediæval Europeans saw Athens and Jerusalem not as placebound cultures owned by Greeks and Jews respectively. They saw them as complementary parts of the human experience, accessible to anyone anywhere.

There are two very new features of what such a deep cosmopolitan project would involve in this century, however. First, while the various premodern

encounters among traditions were almost all dyads, globalisation has opened up room for learning in many directions at once. On this landscape of multiplicity, no one is in the majority, and the issues cannot be reduced to a binary opposition between one's own tradition and one other one. Second, as people move around more, the link between a tradition and a territory will gradually loosen. This would allow a return to thinking about a tradition as an orientation or a guide to living, rather than as a marker of group identity. While the separate traditions undoubtedly will persist in their particularity, their association with certain places and certain people may become blurred over time. Combined, these changes should make it easier, over time, for traditionalists to see all traditions as a common resource.



The open border between Portugal and Spain. Photo by Cleiton Dantadd, September 2006.

12 Homelands and Hospitality

The burning debates over immigration and national identity make a useful test case for thinking about different visions of global citizenship. This chapter considers defences of national civic identities and frames a deep cosmopolitan account of social cohesion. It touches on xenophobia, on ways to blend cosmopolitanism and localism, and on the underestimated perils of racism in a rising China.

It might be said at this point that this revised deep cosmopolitan vision misses a crucial objection. I have traced some of the more insular backlashes against liberal globalisation—be they nationalist or fundamentalist, and of varying degrees of aggressiveness toward the rest of the world—and explained why they do an injustice to the civilisations they claim to represent. And I have considered a more intellectual set of debates around the ownership of traditions and how to imagine overlaps.

Some might insist, however, that I am caricaturing what motivates many people's misgivings about cosmopolitanism. They would say that arguments for opening up different parts of the world to one another underestimate deep attachments to the national community. They will go on to suggest that one can have perfectly laudable reasons for wanting to keep distinct nation-states, reasons that have nothing to do with xenophobia or domination.

I shall call this position *civic particularism*. Its logic runs more or less along the following lines. Assume that we did away with all the frenzied nationalism and superpower aspirations that I critiqued in China, India, and elsewhere. Suppose that we were talking only about units the size of Bhutan, Cambodia, or Denmark, which were unable to throw their weight around. They would have legitimate claims to remaining closed enough to sustain their own unique character. We should not throw the civic baby out with the nationalistic bathwater, so to speak.

The civic particularist position is perhaps most innocently framed with regard

to small countries, though even in the world's power centres the theme sometimes crops up. While many anti-cosmopolitans in America and Europe are 'Big Westerners'—in the sense of lamenting a relative decline in power—there are also 'Little Westerners' who merely want to be left alone. The former American presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan, author of *The Death of the West*, has said that retreating from empire may be the best way to keep a decent society at home, including 'the bonds of family, memory, and neighbourhood'. Economic sacrifice might be the price of identity, as 'a nation is more than just a consumer cooperative'. In the same vein, Nigel Farage, the leader of UKIP, declared that he would be happy to sacrifice some economic growth if that were the consequence of curtailing immigration to Britain.¹

While some of the most loudly insular and aggressive forces of our time think a cosmopolitan world would be too equal for their tastes, the civic particularists worry that it would be too monotonous and too distant from people's sentiments. They are also more likely to be ethically consistent, in saying that any national community, not only their own, should enjoy the same right to determine its own character over time, if necessary by shutting out some influences. As a more evenhanded and consistent line of argument, civic particularism has to be taken seriously. Deep cosmopolitanism must be able to accommodate, or at least engage with, its concerns.

Civic particularism has real roots in most people's experience. They see, and rightly resent, the contempt with which many cosmopolitans treat local loyalties. As MacIntyre puts it, uprooted cosmopolitans 'aspiring to be at home anywhere—except that is, of course, in what they regard as the backward, outmoded, undeveloped cultures of traditions—are therefore in an important way citizens of nowhere.'² Anthropologist Ulf Hannerz notes the pride of many cosmopolitans who lord it over locals, playing up their foreign experiences. They make much of their diverse cultural experiences as trappings of privilege.³ Moreover, the problem goes beyond cosmopolitan disdain, which could probably just be ignored. It is bound up with power and the makeup of society. Sociologist Craig Calhoun insists that today's 'frequent traveller' cosmopolitanism presumes the privileges of wealth or citizenship in certain countries. He says people are more likely to see the weakening of the nation-state through rose-coloured glasses if they survey the world from the security of the European Union than from the dysfunctionality of an African failed state, for example.⁴ According to many critics, globalisation also forces people, for the sake of employment, to be more mobile than they might otherwise wish. It thus 'effaces memory' and weakens

communities. Most traditionalists think liberty and a sense of responsibility flourish within small, more or less self-contained units with a shared culture.⁵

Some civic particularists put less stress on shared culture and more on common political experience. This line of thinking goes back to the French historian Ernest Renan's famous 1882 essay, 'What Is a Nation?' He argued that a nation was not based on blood or language or religion, but on the 'daily referendum' of living together and wanting to share a common political life.⁶ Some leftist opposition to the EU today comes from this angle. The leftist republican political theorist David Miller, for example, argues that democracy and social justice require trust among citizens. People must feel they share a common fate. Under modern conditions, he thinks the natural scale of democracy is the size of a European nation-state. The EU is simply too big. Citizens of different member states feel little in common and do not always trust one another. As the Eurozone debt crisis made many wonder, why should a German feel motivated to make sacrifices for a Greek? Studies of public opinion in the EU find that trust in EU institutions is low and that most Europeans think their voices do not count in the corridors of power. There are also concerns in many states about the weakening of social protections as the scale of policymaking has shifted upward. Communitarians such as Walzer tend to agree. They see the nation-state not mainly as a bulwark against outsiders, as xenophobes do, but rather as a political space in which to share burdens fairly. Take away national borders, according to Walzer, and the world would shatter into 'a thousand petty fortresses', with the soulless global market reigning supreme.⁷

On this question of political scale, there is some convergence between certain communitarian strands of the left and many right-leaning traditionalists. The EU is a favourite target of both. The French political philosopher Pierre Manent says that the EU project undermines democracy by forgetting its roots in national experience. As heirs of the old Greek city-states, nations offer a scale large enough for internal diversity and respect among strangers, but defined enough for a sense of peoplehood. The EU's folly, Manent claims, is that it seeks to take the practices of democracy—rights, rule of law, and so on—and shift them up to a transnational level without a common culture. Such hubris will end in failure. Across the Channel, his English conservative counterpart, Roger Scruton, makes a similar case that European democracy is intertwined with the nation-state. As a scale of political loyalty, it is a 'rare achievement' in history:

Members of tribes see each other as a family; members of creed communities see each other as the faithful; members of nations see each other as neighbours. Vital to the sense of nationhood, therefore, is the idea of a common territory, in which we are all settled, and to which we are all entitled as our home.⁸

A more nuanced defence of the nation-state comes from traditionalists of a philosophical bent. Those fond of Plato, such as Patrick Deneen and Joshua Parens, find an unavoidable tension between the universal truths of philosophy, on the one hand, and the attachment of human beings to their own particular communities, on the other. They think it can be noble for a philosopher to escape from his or her own society and explore the cosmopolis, in a quest for placeless truth. Thus was the original Greek meaning of ‘theory’, with the same root as the word for ‘travel’. See enough of the world, and you catch a glimpse of what lies beneath. But according to these writers, the philosopher can hope for only a ‘limited transcendence’, confined to the realm of philosophy. In the end, the philosopher must always return to a particular community. And the vast majority of people never choose to abandon their own societies in the first place. Any fantasy about universal politics must fail, therefore. The cosmopolitan conceit, when improperly introduced to political life, does more harm than good. It undermines loyalty and a sense of belonging, which are the preconditions for justice.⁹

So far we have seen an array of misgivings about too much transnationalism, across the spectrum from leftists to communitarians to nationalists to philosophical traditionalists. A point of convergence among them is the idea that a vibrant civic community—for traditionalists, this would include a virtuous civic community—requires boundaries and shared culture on not too large a scale.

This issue presses most vividly in debates over migration. Imagine that no one ever left his or her birthplace. Whatever shades of cultural difference might add up over short or long distances, the question of belonging would never arise. By definition, everyone would belong to the village, province, and country in which he or she lived. Lines on the map, drawn on any scale, would make little difference for the texture of daily life. Boundaries and belonging become a live issue only because of migration. When people move, we have to decide who is in and who is out, and on what scale it should matter. And it is migration that drives many of today’s fears about national identity, including unease about

what might happen if borders vanished and we adopted more cosmopolitan political arrangements. In a genuinely cosmopolitan world order, the patterns of migration would surely differ, in both scale and direction, from what those we see today. Still, the core issues and sensitivities are likely to be the same.

Much of the pressure on the nation-state comes from an upsurge of migration across borders. About one in thirty people now live outside the land of their birth, and their numbers are growing fast. The way such migrants think about their place in the world has also changed. One study of the upscale Hong Kong diaspora found a trend, particularly since the 1990s, toward ‘transnationality’ and ‘flexible citizenship’. To hedge against political instability and economic downturns, business executives and their families get multiple passports and buy property on both sides of the Pacific. Vancouver has become a mirror of Hong Kong. Loyalty to any one state gives way to a pragmatic mobility. Another researcher has noted that a lot of international movement today involves ‘transmigrants’, who keep one foot in their host country and another in their country of origin. They might be politically active in both, and consider themselves part of a cultural universe that cuts across borders. The speed and ease of movement have caused many such people to rethink where they belong. Instead of ‘concentric circles’ of loyalty to family, town, and country, they now sit at the crossroads of flexible ‘rhizomatic’ networks that cut across those old units.¹⁰

These individual strategies often arise despite laws rather than because of them. But some shifts in the broader political environment have made living this way much more possible than a few decades ago. During the postwar period, European states’ framework for dealing with migrant workers gradually moved from an emphasis on territorial citizenship to rights that attach to human beings as such. Since the 1990s, rights of movement, a ‘citizenship of flow’, have become even more important in experiments such as the European Union.¹¹ If we project all these trends into the future, we can see why defenders of the nation-state feel uneasy. A growing chunk of the world’s population has multiple loyalties, is not fully integrated into one society and only one society, and is unapologetic about living that way. Backlashes against these demographic and psychological shifts have abounded. To take apart the ethical issues involved, I want to take as point of departure an incident that touched on many sensitivities about culture and belonging.

In late 2009, Switzerland got a few days of intense news coverage in the global media.¹² As Europe’s oldest and deepest direct democracy, it put a

contentious question up for nationwide referendum. Some 57 per cent of Swiss voters approved an initiative to ban building new minarets anywhere in the country. To some observers, the controversy seemed like a tempest in a teacup, since there were only four minarets in the whole of Switzerland. But the referendum became a symbol of tensions over national identity, tolerance, and the place of Muslims and other immigrants.

From the cafés of liberal Geneva to the newsrooms of BBC and CNN, the referendum result was obviously distasteful. It seemed to smack of xenophobia and a peculiar animus toward a Muslim minority that makes up barely 5 per cent of the Swiss population. Rights-oriented NGOs and activist groups protested mightily against the proposal, and after the vote announced they would take the matter to the European Court of Human Rights at Strasbourg. The Federal Council and Assembly had also made their views abundantly clear beforehand, recommending that voters reject the idea as an embarrassment to Switzerland's image abroad.

The initiative's supporters saw matters quite differently. They only got the referendum underway by forcing it up to the federal level, after earlier attempts within the cantons had been blocked as unconstitutional. They had to wage their campaign against opposition from much of the Swiss elite. And they felt banning minarets was a sorely needed response to encroachment by radical Islam. They aligned with many commentators who fear the emergence of 'Eurabia'—a surge of Muslim immigration that turns Europe into a timid appendage of the Middle East.¹³ From their perspective, minarets are symbols of Islamism as a political force. They argue that the desire to ban them stems from a long-frustrated democratic will to preserve local identity and values.

The minaret controversy is but the latest instance in a growing trend across the developed West and especially in western Europe. Large chunks of the populace are uncomfortable with the shifting demographic landscape of their homelands. Often the focus is Muslim immigrants, some of whom are associated with Islamist ideologies at odds with European democracy. More broadly, it is the growing numbers of immigrants who are quite literally recolouring society. A month before the minaret incident, controversy swirled around the BBC's invitation to Nick Griffin, head of the British National Party, to appear on the 'Question Time' television programme. He took the opportunity to lambaste successive governments for a lax immigration policy that had brought wave upon wave of unassimilable minorities into the country. Claiming to speak for the frustrated 'indigenous population', he called for measures to stem and

reverse the flow, and to restore the overwhelmingly white make-up of Britain before 1948.¹⁴

Some of this lashing out is merely European chauvinism, a counterpart of the aggressive nationalism I have already described in China and elsewhere. At other times it comes from otherwise sophisticated people, including many who have lived abroad for decades but who complain that ‘England does not look like England’. Some of them should, by inclination, be at home with something like a deep cosmopolitanism. A few years ago, a very elderly relative of mine, a retired headmaster, lamented over dinner the loss of high culture and that educated people today rarely read Cicero. Given what we have seen of the cosmopolitan impulses in the old European high culture, he could hardly be lumped with the insular sort of popular nationalist. Yet later in the same conversation, he remarked that Britain’s surge of immigration in recent decades had ‘lowered standards’. This struck me as the same tension that apparently had once existed in the mind of Enoch Powell, the classical scholar and fluent Hindi-speaker who, as a Member of Parliament in 1968, gave the ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech—filled with learned allusions to Roman history—urging an end to non-white immigration.¹⁵

I suggested to my relative that the scale of people moving around was not the real issue. After all, the same cultural decay he disliked was happening all over the world, more or less in parallel. He could acknowledge as much, but only in the abstract. That conversation does suggest one reason why the problem is so often misdiagnosed. Those who want to keep alive the old standards of virtue often have very little, if any, contact with their counterparts from other civilisations. They meet no deep cosmopolitans of different backgrounds. Instead, their exposure to the cosmopolis comes largely from those of a liberal cosmopolitan bent, with all the associations that that entails. They do not see an influx into their countries of counterparts to themselves. Rather, they hear the rhetoric of open borders and inclusion issuing from the mouths of a professional stratum pushing its way upward, disconnected from any tradition—including its own—and wedded to all the usual liberal orthodoxies. Such people are not kindred spirits for anyone committed to what is left of an indigenous high culture. Small wonder that the upsurge of migration and the erosion of a distinct national culture leave a foul taste in the mouths of those who would like more reading of Cicero.

Given enough experience of common challenges, and the germ of a political project to unite them, I suspect that those rooted in the separate high cultures

could overcome their present insularity. It is, after all, largely a problem of diagnosis rather than of fundamental alignments. The misdiagnosis tends to extend to broader swaths of host populations as well. Empirical studies done on xenophobia have found that, for many people, views of immigration in the abstract often conceal a focus on specific types of immigrants that they encounter in daily life. If they encounter those who are prosperous, educated, and of similar cultural background, then they are more likely to interact with them and think they enrich the community. If they mostly encounter those they perceive as disruptive and alien, then attitudes will harden against them.¹⁶ It bears noting that how groups are seen on this spectrum need not be fixed. Their interactions and impressions have a social context around them. They are shaped both by how those involved think about common ground, and about the social breakdown that is often a byproduct of modernity itself.

Indeed, we find some hopeful signs if we look more closely, from a discerning traditionalist angle, at how some of the more disdained immigrants do or do not fit into the receiving society. What was one of the strongest voices against the minaret ban in Switzerland, and against the Danish cartoons mocking Muḥammad a couple of years earlier? None other than the Catholic Church, true to its old civilisational universalism as well as its more recent effort to reach out to Muslims as fellow religious believers.¹⁷ As I have argued throughout this book, by looking back in history we can find a cosmopolitan moral clarity quite different in flavour from the liberal sort that destroys traditions. Given time, traditionalists of a high culture bent can and probably will expand their comfort zone.

When we move a bit down the scale, into the experience of most people desperate to defend their communities, things get more complicated. Most Swiss voters who approved the minaret ban were not readers of Cicero who merely misunderstood their natural allies. They were small-town dwellers who felt the ground shifting under their feet and deeply resented it. Still, one has to ask why the ground was shifting. When decent locally-minded people bemoan social decay and then take a swipe at ethnic diversity, they are conflating two different trends. Unfortunately, the influx of outsiders into these societies has coincided with a breakdown of many of the small decencies. In a small European town, it is much easier to see hundreds of African or Asian immigrants moving in than to see the money-driven mobility, shifting mores, and decadent youth culture of one's own compatriots. The McDonalds opened on the village square is not usually owned by a Somali immigrant, though he might take a job in it after the

fact.

The same applies to larger cities that have received the bulk of immigration. As travel plans turned out, I once had to stay one night at an hotel in the centre of Bradford, in northern England. That city's many social ills are typically blamed on its high levels of South Asian immigration. And it is true that walking around Bradford on a summer Saturday evening is an unenviable experience. But looked at more closely, the signs of dysfunction did not quite fit the more xenophobic of narratives. To be sure, I was passed from time to time by souped-up cars driven by shaven-headed Pakistani youths who looked as if they belonged in a gang, with music booming out the windows. But there were far more native English youth, soused and underdressed, spilling out indecorously from pubs on to the pavement and looking as if a punch-up would ensue before midnight. And I could not help but notice that the more respectably behaved people walking about were more likely than not to be wearing a hijab or a shalwar kurta.

It helps, when indicting social breakdown, to get cause and effect straight. Strong communities are indeed being undermined by economic and cultural changes. And it is true that some studies have shown that increasing ethnic diversity in a neighbourhood can make people less trusting of strangers, at least in the medium term.¹⁸ But context matters. Most of the impetus behind those changes is not from migration. It is from a global market driven by liberal cosmopolitans who would be all too happy, so long as they are not disturbed themselves, to have the provincials bash one another rather than focusing on the real problem: the globalisation of concrete, glass, and neon. Crime also is a product of uprootedness and depravity, not of cultural difference. I would go out on a limb to venture that very few burglars in Switzerland attend a mosque, with or without a minaret atop it.

Even so, I know that these observations only partly address what drove the Swiss to the ballot box. They might not change their minds even if convinced that the social problems that grieve them are not due to immigrants as such, and even if one could guarantee that all Muslims were perfectly law-abiding and civic-minded. They might still not want too many of them next door and erecting symbols of their alien values in full view. This goes to a deeper question of why boundaries matter and exactly what one hopes to preserve inside them.

Many people around the world would hold that, even after global inequalities lessen, some restrictions on migration should remain. I recall a banquet I attended in Nanjing some years ago, at which the guest of honour was a well-

known Chinese scholar, the brother of a cabinet minister. He had given a talk earlier, replete with the usual fevered enthusiasm about China's rise as a superpower. During the dinner, the conversation turned to the experience of one Chinese-American student whose parents had migrated to America years earlier in search of economic opportunity. Our guest promptly told her that he looked forward to a time when the wheel of history would turn, and her American grandchildren's fondest dream would be to get a Chinese green card. No doubt part of his vision was a hope of erasing past humiliation and seeing his country as a desired destination. Yet I could not help but wonder why the goal for a half century hence could not instead be the abolition of green cards in any direction.

Opening borders would run against some entrenched attitudes. One of my Chinese students told me that outsiders in China should expect to be well treated as 'guests', but never to be 'accepted' as insiders. On the spectrum of attitudes around the world, such hard distinctions may be rather more pronounced in China than in many other countries. But the ideas of 'guesthood' and the insider's 'ownership' of territory recur elsewhere too, in varying degrees. Those Swiss voters who wanted to ban minarets felt quite within their rights to do so. They saw it as reclaiming their space. This idea of guesthood most often has an undertone of xenophobia. But it crops up among those of other ideological leanings, too. From a roughly postmodern angle, one writer has used the language of 'hospitality' to describe the sort of tolerance that treats people well while leaving intact the 'irreducible difference' between host and guest.¹⁹

While it makes sense to treat people as guests in one's home, I confess that I find it much harder to grasp larger-scale notions of guesthood and the ethnic ownership of a place. It is one thing to have a strong ethnic identity, a connexion with the cultural heritage and folkways of one's forebears. The world has lost much ethnic diversity in its slide into cultural anaemia and could benefit from a revival. Just as deep cosmopolitanism takes no stand on personal religious commitments, focusing instead on overlapping virtues, so too should it have no quarrel with ethnic identities persisting. I should never expect a Punjabi family in England to 'become' English; nor, for that matter, should I expect their English neighbours to think of them as 'really' English when they probably do not.

But wanting diversity to continue is quite different from linking it to territory and guesthood. A deep cosmopolitan political vision cannot recognise guesthood without contradicting itself. In any practical civic sense, there should be no difference whether the English and Punjabi neighbours live side by side in Leeds

or in Lahore. After settlement, guesthood becomes a backhanded insult. It is at odds with civilisation, in the old sense of truths that transcend place and people. When the Buddhist monk Xuanzang was invited to preside over a theological debate among Indians, and when Rabban Sawma's travelling companion from China was elected as patriarch of the Nestorian Church in Baghdad, they were not guests. To say even that Ricci was a guest of the Confucians is misleading.

The insistence on guesthood today is a mental regression, the refuge of the walled-off primitive. To question it in the name of cosmopolitanism is not multicultural claptrap of the sort that drives locally minded traditionalists up the wall. Quite the contrary: this view of diversity is pre-national as much as post-national. After all, no one thought that time and space turned a Greek in the Ottoman Empire into a Turk, but the Greeks were not mere guests of the Turks, either.

Today's upsurge of migration is merely erasing a blip in world history. It is loosening anew the links between ethnicity, or religion, and territory. The Algerians in Switzerland, and the Nigerians in Guangzhou, are just the tip of the iceberg. Even with a modest continuation of the trends we have now, imagine what happens to the world's population cumulatively after two or three centuries. We shall undoubtedly see more people of multiple ethnicities, as well as more people of one ethnicity who live outside the territory historically associated with it. The world's diasporas already give us a foretaste of what that looks like. Even a third of humanity in such a hybridised or transplanted condition will make the global demographic unrecognisable by today's standards. It will become hard to say that minaret-building Muslims in a Swiss village 'own' that village any less than a neighbour whose forebears lived there for ten generations. And it becomes not just hard but preposterous to say that the Muslim villager should defer to someone three cantons away as an 'insider' who defines 'Swissness'.

Future world citizens would still have plenty of diversity not linked to place. Religious diversity is crucial and likely to persist in the very long term. Diverse sources of spiritual inspiration strengthen individual conscience and chasten any state. Salvation is outside the polity, and only outside it. In other dimensions of life, we should find varying levels of diversity depending on the person and the time period. At the personal and familial level, I imagine a strong sense of civilisational membership would persist for a very long time alongside citizenship in any future cosmopolis. It would no doubt be somewhat more hybridised and much more deterritorialised than now, though. The great-great

grandson of a Sunni Muslim doctor in Lahore today might well turn out to be a Sunni Muslim doctor of mixed Punjabi and Palestinian ancestry living in Patagonia. Such would be a gain to the world, not a loss.

The vision of persistent but deterritorialised diversity that I have outlined will alarm some readers, no doubt. It will be easier, on average, for people from some parts of the world to accept than for others. Areas with a long history of homogeneity and little movement, such as parts of Europe and East Asia, will find it unsettling at first. Regions with multiple minorities and cross-cutting communities of religion, language, and ethnicity, such as much of the Middle East and South Asia, may find it more familiar. In immigrant countries such as America, some aspects would be easier to accept than others. America has a melting-pot heritage in which ethnicity rarely maps on to territory. It will ruffle few American feathers to predict that the link of place and patrimony will weaken further in the world. But at the same time, America has been deeply assimilationist. Ethnicity that persists beyond a generation or two, with firmer links to a culture of origin than to the melting pot, strikes many as un-American. The sword thus cuts both ways, against both xenophobia and assimilation. Deep cosmopolitanism has something to unsettle everyone, even as it promises to restore valued traditions and spark a cross-cultural renaissance.

The overarching implication of a deep cosmopolitan perspective for opening borders is that, in relation to ultimate goods, migration matters little. The alleged ill effects of migration in our time are largely due to other factors beyond mere movement of people.

That said, it is possible for a deep cosmopolitan to recognise the virtues of strong local communities with a sense of belonging and civic participation. Indeed, it is when we move down from the nation-state to smaller units of identity, in the texture of daily life, that the issue becomes most pressing. Just because deep cosmopolitanism is most useful for addressing global questions and bridging high cultures does not mean overlooking the need to restore decency at a level closer to most people. Indeed, in my second book, *A Path of Our Own*, I laid out an approach to rural development that aimed at doing just that.²⁰ An honest resurrection of the best of the old civilisations would require a division of labour and mutual support between the global and the local.

A decent civilisation has several layers, and several approaches to life, which interlock with one another. The central nodes of a deep cosmopolitan world civilisation would lie, as I have suggested, at the intersection of the old high cultures. In all societies, the further up the social scale you go, the broader your

horizons. Patricians under the Roman empire roamed the reach of the Mediterranean. Today's liberal global citizens—or global shareholders, more aptly—are also a thin and upscale layer. If migration by all people will pick up over coming generations, whatever else happens, then we should expect extraordinarily high geographic mobility among the educated a century or two hence. They would probably make today's business executives and academics and NGO workers look provincial by comparison.

Still, true global citizens of any sort, in the sense of having their primary loyalties above the local and regional level, will probably always be a minority. This is as it should be. The mere fact of having broader horizons in the abstract does not necessarily make one morally superior in practice. As one Christian writer put it in casting doubt on the fad for abstract but thin obligations to all humanity, such an outlook too often produces the sort of person who is 'a public servant' but 'a private rogue'.²¹ Deep cosmopolitanism's more ample resources for thinking about human flourishing hold out the promise both of strengthening character cultivation and more modestly limiting the ambitions of how far it applies. Trying to turn every farmer and artisan into a global citizen would be artificial and would invite suspicion that the world civilisation aimed to erode local cultures. Full engagement in a deep cosmopolitan world civilisation would thus occur mainly among a minority of people educated in a synthesis of the great traditions, committed to their ever closer conciliation, and living cross-culturally. Being more attentive to the diversity of human needs, they should also be actively supportive of a global political architecture that could strike a healthy balance between cosmopolitanism and strong communities nested within it.

What is likely to be sacrificed in such a revival is neither the global nor the local, but the mid-level: the nation-state. Any good localist concerned about diversity and participation should view the nation-state as part of the problem, rather than a useful rampart. Adding up the balance sheet, we can see that in modern times more local diversity has been eradicated by strong national governments than by any global forces, even those of today's rampant capitalism.

Indeed, I am sometimes struck by the blindness of many nationalists to this loss of diversity within countries. In one discussion of media globalisation with my Chinese students, I heard some of them lament the erosion of Chinese culture by Hollywood imports. I could agree wholeheartedly with their indictment. Then we got on to the broadcasting of regional Chinese languages such as Cantonese

and Shanghaiese. The same people who had been complaining about loss of national-level diversity looked askance at the idea of having more Chinese media broadcast in languages other than Mandarin. Some even said that they felt offended by hearing Shanghaiese so widely spoken whenever they visited that city. They said it made them feel unwelcome in their own country. I pointed out that I should not go to Denmark and demand that people speak English. They replied that that was a different country, so the rule did not apply. Inside lines arbitrarily drawn on a map, however, a flattening of diversity was apparently fine. When such is nationalism, we might infer that a genuine cosmopolitan opening of borders would be the best gift to localism, not the greatest threat to it.

Take a practical problem, one not so different from the one behind the initiative in Switzerland. For many people, preserving traditional life may mean making sure that a village still ‘looks like’ England, or Switzerland, or the Punjab. One may well find it moving to stand in the middle of a community and feel that one is in a distinct place with a history. I have felt it myself many a time. But our eyesight reaches only so far. Do all the local zoning you want—including banning (if you must) minarets or (preferably) McDonalds franchises. But do it in one place, with real participation by stakeholders who themselves stand on the village green and look out at their surroundings. Do it because the landscape of the village grew up organically over the centuries, and fits the texture of life that you want to preserve. Do not do it because it makes a nice image for a postcard or an election pamphlet. This way, you will have more local diversity and more sense of place than any national wall-building will give you.

What about civic participation? There are large grains of truth in the claim that democracy and public-spiritedness require a sense of belonging and trust among citizens. Villages made up of nomads would probably not have enough of it. We should take this issue seriously, and respond to it on the level where it really matters: locally. How might we ensure that rootless outsiders with no stake in local life do not destroy communities built up over the generations? It is well known that newcomers often bring alien sensibilities, buy up property and drive up prices, and the like. When they are foreign immigrants, then the tempting response is to impose all manner of restrictions on their entry or on what stakes they can acquire. Yet any strict application of such logic should extend to all outsiders, including those from other parts of the same country. If outsiders with outside money destroy communities, then who they are should not matter.

A fine example is from a north Indian hill station where I once spent a few months. I heard that the locals greatly resented a certain wealthy investor from

elsewhere in India who had bought up a number of old houses and seemed to flout many of the rules about what could be done with them. One fellow described him as part of a ‘land mafia’ and more likely to kick a beggar than feed him. In such communities, locals are being outbid by the wealthy from places such as Delhi and Mumbai. Yet at the same time, India has stiff laws preventing foreign citizens from buying land, ostensibly to protect the common good. Such lines on a map may be convenient for those who influence policy. The rules let them make patriotic noises while they corner the market on their own holiday homes in the mountains. Yet it is far from obvious that such selective restrictions really serve the interests of small communities and the ordinary people living in them. They are more about giving free rein to those who dominate within each country, while in turn protecting them from a truly global playing field.

Unlike the fevered ambitions of both nationalism and the global market to flatten diversity, deep cosmopolitanism has no battle to pick with local citizenship. Local citizenship cannot recover its appropriate weight without a strong enough framework far above it, at the global level. If that framework is the present sort of liberal globalisation, the erosion of local diversity will continue. Only something as rich as a civilisational overlay—meaning, in a modern context, deep cosmopolitanism—can rise to the purpose.



Protesters in Tahrir Square demanding the removal of Hosni Mubarak in the early days of the Arab Spring. Photo by Jonathan Rashad, 11 February 2011.

13 World Citizens in the Making

The last few chapters traced the contours of the global landscape today. We have seen the rise of supranational experiments in liberal cosmopolitanism such as the European Union, and the rise of new non-Western power centres such as China with their own rather hard-edged ambitions. The global political spectrum tends nowadays to array itself between the liberal cosmopolitans on the one hand, and strident voices from various civilisations, who typically fail to do justice to the banners they wield, on the other. We have also seen the regression that has often occurred in how traditions are imagined, no longer as essentially human resources but rather as markers of identity, jostling with one another for status. Then we explored some more promising ways of finding common ground across traditions, particularly of a religious character, based less on doctrines than on parallel virtues. Finally, we saw how a deep cosmopolitan perspective challenges the rising tide of xenophobic reactions against migration. It has the resources to sustain both a more open view of the planet as our common home and robust local communities of the kind that have been eroded by the fevered excesses of the market and the nation-state.

This exploration has shown, among other things, that there is more than one way to be globally minded. The usual enthusiasts of globalisation today run from the free-market right, to the social-democratic centre-left, to the radical left. While there are many ways to slice up the same spectrum, these blocs roughly map on to what international relations theorist Raffaele Marchetti dubs ‘neoliberalism’, ‘cosmopolitanism’, and ‘alter-globalism’.¹ These three currents have different ideas about the global institutional architecture and how globalisation’s benefits are shared out. Yet they are all broadly liberal in their ultimate foundations, with no appreciable link to the great traditions.

Indeed, traditionalist perspectives usually get short shrift in any overview of globalisation. Marchetti’s account is fairly typical in that alongside the other three camps, he mentions a fourth, which he calls ‘dialogue of civilisations’.

This, he claims, is the conservative and elite-led approach that sees civilisational identities as more important than countries, but still wants to maintain some gaps between civilisations. He assumes that traditionalism is tightly bound up with top-down control, defensiveness, and a desire to keep one's distance from other parts of the world.²

Such a defensive view of dialogue is certainly one approach linked to the language of tradition. Some of the Muslim clergy take such a view, and it also comes through in distorted fashion in the Chinese establishment's rhetoric about 'political civilisations'. But the story I have traced of deep cosmopolitanism in history, as well as some of its present implications, does show that the traditions' engagement with globalisation need not be defensive. It is possible to be globally minded in a way that is neither liberal nor obsessed with upholding essential differences across civilisations.

It is this rich history and logic of deep cosmopolitanism that will need rediscovering, and revivifying, in this century. Those around the world who are potentially deep cosmopolitans have some limited but vital common ground, made all the more obvious under pressure from today's globalisation. Any world civilisation, heir to the regional civilisations, would rise like a phoenix from the ashes. Much of its inspiration can come from the several ethical traditions being brought together in a joint renaissance. But here we run into an unavoidable difficulty. All I have said so far about what a deep cosmopolitan approach to education might look like, how those of different faiths can imagine a common global citizenship, and so on, still remains on a fairly abstract plane. To urge thinking about common ground is not the same thing as bringing that common ground to the surface and building concretely upon it.

After all, there is no such thing as a civilisation in the abstract. This was true for the regional civilisations, and it will be true for the coming world civilisation as well. Just as in the past, ideals have to crystallise in specific causes and institutions and ways of life. Today, such crystallisation has not yet happened even for liberal globalisation. Concrete, glass, and neon go some of the way to a common style of life, among those who like things that way. Yet they hardly add up to a shared identity even for those at home with the world as it is. The beneficiaries of liberal globalisation savour diversity and a tolerant conviviality, but have few folkways of their own. As historian Anthony D Smith put it, the emerging global culture is still a 'mélange of disparate components drawn from everywhere and nowhere'. We have a lot of global communication but little of it really inspires people. According to Smith, national cultures have bound people

together because they have shared memories of turning points in their pasts and a common destiny over the generations.³

A true world citizenship along deep cosmopolitan lines will require practice alongside thought. It means connecting the dots of how would-be deep cosmopolitans imagine themselves and their place in the world. A world civilisation will only truly be thought of as common property, as belonging to likeminded people everywhere, if it emerges from a common experience. It will need the kind of shared historical memories that Smith says were crucial in forging nation-states. Historical memories come out of a fight for political causes, a fight to reshape society. One cannot be a cosmopolitan, so to speak, without a cosmopolis: a global space of political action. The goal cannot be merely to create a common high culture among those of deep cosmopolitan sympathies. It will require also transforming the global political landscape more broadly and establishing the sort of well-ordered arrangements that allow for the full range of human goods again to flourish. The global, the local, and every other sphere of human activity are all within the scope of any traditionalist recivilising project. The point of contact between transformation and a common story is crucial. Anything like a common way of life comes less from thinking than from doing, and especially doing together. Our statures become more similar when we exercise ourselves in similar ways.

The ideals of any tradition are fleshed out in practice, through making difficult decisions in society, case by case. While guiding principles are important, it might be all too tempting for enthusiasts to try hurrying things along according to some blueprint. Yet forging a true world civilisation will be a gradual and in many ways spontaneous process. Just as the regional civilisations emerged organically over many generations, so too must the meeting of ethical traditions on a global scale follow its own, largely spontaneous, logic. If we try to predetermine the outcome, we run the risk of a hubristic farce such as Akbar's syncretism in the 1580s. This is especially so for a tradition—or umbrella 'tradition of traditions'—in the process of creation. Influential people who act without the wisdom of the great traditions are either directionless do-gooders or revolutionaries who get carried away. Discerning people who grasp the great traditions but who do not feel a duty within the world will be spectators on history. Only if wisdom and duty combine can we be hopeful about the prospect of founding whatever succeeds liberal modernity.

This question of how to wed thought and mission is an old one, going back to the ancients such as the Confucians who spoke of 'cultivating themselves and

pacifying the world under Heaven'. Plato regretted that those who held power were not those who discerned truth. As he put it, the challenge was either to make philosophers into kings or to make kings into philosophers.⁴ Today, the same problem faces any would-be advocates of deep cosmopolitanism. They are far from power, with aims quite opposite those of the liberal cosmopolitans who now rule the world. How might this gap be bridged? One option might be to try, over several generations, converting the descendants of the liberal cosmopolitans to deep cosmopolitanism. The present generation of globalisers get the scale right but the content wrong. Might they one day get the content right? We should be sceptical, given their embrace of consumer culture and the entrenched material interests that make it hard to reach out to the world's most traditional people. There are unlikely to be many copies of the scriptures or the classics furtively brought out at lunchtime in the skyscrapers of Wall Street and Pudong. Still, at least the idealists among them are aware of an ethical vacuum that needs filling. While we might expect some liberal converts once an alternative is already gaining ground, however, we should not pin too many hopes on a change of heart.

What about turning philosophers into kings? Or, more precisely, what about forming networks among the likeminded that could one day tilt the global political landscape? I think this strategy is more plausible in the long run. Such a multigenerational struggle is also the experience most likely to flesh out what world citizenship means in practice. Deep cosmopolitanism will only crystallise if it is brought to the surface politically and offers a stark choice regarding the world's future.

Still, we have to ask who the philosophers are. Apart from the would-be deep cosmopolitan readers of this book—most of whom are, admittedly, more likely to be sympathetically among traditions rather than fully embedded within any one of them—who are the cosmopolitan traditionalists? What sort of intellectuals and activists around the world today are likely to be receptive to making common cause?

Here I should mention what at first might seem an unlikely example. In March 2012, I had a long interview with a prominent Shi'ite cleric in Beirut. He was an influential figure in Hizbullah and had overseen efforts to allay the mistrust between this radical Shi'ite movement and other groups in Lebanon's polarised society, including Sunnis and Maronite Christians. As he sat in full clerical attire twirling his prayer beads and intoning elegant formal Arabic, he seemed in many ways to come from another era. Much of what he said would have been

recognisable to earlier deep cosmopolitans and was quite unlike what issues forth from the more paranoid brand of Islamists.

In particular, he criticised many Islamist groups' aspiration for political power along a Western model, which confined Islamic civilisation within territorial statehood. Civilisation viewed as a set of values was inherently open to humanity. In contrast, the civilisation-state idea, which he also saw lurking behind America's aggressive efforts to remake the world in its own image, would lead only to bitter conflict. I pushed him on what openness to the rest of the world might mean, particularly beyond the Middle East. 'I don't feel any distinction in building relationships with Muslims versus non-Muslims', he insisted, though he admitted that he had had little practical opportunity so far to forge ties with people far from his own setting. He was quite astute about what such breakthroughs would require. 'For there to be receptivity to true partnership between currents in the Islamic world and currents outside the Islamic world, there has to be interaction and new maturity beyond what is found within the Islamic world itself.' Too many of his fellow Muslims clung to a 'single view' of the West as an undifferentiated enemy, rather than seeing points of contact with specific types of people. To overcome that obstacle would require 'maturity from more experience, lived experience; I'm not saying on the level of concepts'. Which counterparts did he have in mind? He said he admired the late Pope John Paul II, as well as what he knew of the Catholic liberation theology movements in Latin America, for example.

This man had a heartening level of openness in principle, though he was in some ways the exception proving the rule. This goes to the heart of why movements invoking traditionalist language today are so often insular and rightly perceived as such. Much like the Catholic clergy and others who have been involved in interreligious dialogue, this Shi'ite cleric was thoroughly grounded in a high-culture tradition. He was quite different from the xenophobes who have come to define the image of Islamist political movements for much of the world. There is a history behind this turn inward on the part of most claiming to speak for the great traditions. The social base of the traditions has flattened. Revolutions, along with the general churning of liberal meritocracy as it attracted the talented to its own ranks, effectively decapitated the great civilisations. Those who maintain the old high culture traditions are a shrinking minority, and those of them with any real political following rarer still. The more popular social strata that make up the bulk of the movements invoking the banner of each civilisation tend to have narrower horizons, more or less by

default.

That the social base of the traditions is today flatter than ever before is a real challenge. But it can also be an opportunity, because the reservoir of sympathy for the traditions is also very much intertwined with challenges of poverty and exclusion. While the smattering of clerics and other intellectuals with deep cosmopolitan sympathies do have a role to play, that is not whence the social energy will come. They are not the ones living in squalor, but the mainstream of global public opinion is. Most human beings—from the rural hamlets, to the small towns, to the urban slums—remain more or less traditional in their personal and political inclinations. Those billions will matter much more than some now think.

Any time one thinks about the forgotten majority or energy bubbling up from below, one wades into what revolutionaries have long called ‘the social question’. Left-of-centre critics of globalisation today are very conscious of the inequalities between rich and poor. In some ways, that gap has widened even as free trade has bound the world more tightly together. The social question is the overriding motive of many activists, including the ‘anti-globalisation’ or ‘global justice movement’ protesters who burst on to the world stage at Seattle and Genoa some years ago. When the World Social Forum convenes annually as a counterpoint to the elite meetings at Davos and insists that ‘another world is possible’, it does so mostly on behalf of the poor.⁵

Any alternative to the globalisation of concrete, glass, and neon will have to take up the social question. The present global economic order has proved its inability to close the gap and eliminate poverty. Even when it distributes more baubles here and there, it locks the vulnerable into a rat race and further erodes community and human dignity. This deprivation is the Achilles’ heel of global liberalism and the most obvious source of popular discontent. As the political thinker Hannah Arendt noted in her book *On Revolution*, the pressure of poverty can push people into the streets to dislodge an old regime.⁶ In a profound crisis—far more severe than the present global recession—the system might well wobble and then fall.

As both moral and political imperative, therefore, any incarnation of deep cosmopolitanism in this century must be much more tightly bound to the social question. Nearly all of the cosmopolitan experiments I dug up in the first half of this book were carried out by circles of privilege, as a rather esoteric exercise. I suspect that the likes of Ricci and Abū’l-Faʿl would not have been caught dead talking to a slum-dweller. Today, the motives line up very differently. The

Catholic Church went through something of a reorientation along these lines over the last century, away from the European establishment and towards trenchant critiques of social injustice, imperialism, and the like. It rediscovered its roots amid the dispossessed, so to speak. The same imperatives recur across the world. Deep cosmopolitans, by and large, are likely today to be at odds with the world's circles of power and wealth rather than aligned with them. To put it bluntly, liberal modernity has handed deep cosmopolitans the social question. Its legitimation of lucre-lust has left a ghastly contrast between glitter and squalor. The opportunity in any emerging global political space to address such deprivation is also a call to bring the ethical aspirations of the great traditions down to earth.

Here, deep cosmopolitans have a vital role to play. The social question is grave enough to bring the present order into crisis and even towards collapse in some scenarios. Yet the endgame should be much more constructive than just watching its fall. It should be an act that combines restoration and creation: the founding of a world political culture true to the spirit of the old civilisations even though it spans the planet for the first time. The activists of the left may have plenty of energy, and useful energy at that. Yet they lack the ethical resources of deep cosmopolitanism, because they share with the liberal mainstream a fatal neglect of tradition's insights for humanity.

When this energy bubbles up from below, what might drive an openness to allies in other parts of the world? In other words, how might social movements find a need to ally across borders and across civilisations?

We can bring this question down to earth by looking more closely at the Arab Spring, the wave of revolutions that toppled regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen starting in 2011 and that may yet spread to other countries in the region and beyond. The Arab Spring was driven by a yearning for political participation and social justice on the part of those young and dispossessed people who have been ill served by the globalisation of concrete, glass, and neon. The grievances are universal, and the fury with which they burst forth on the Arab street is a searing indictment of the present world order. At the same time, the social base of the Arab Spring and kindred movements is for the most part deeply traditional, in the sense that it believes that old certainties—in context, from Islam—offer a sound guide to both private and public life.

I dug more deeply into the thinking of these people in April and May of 2012 by doing some fairly extensive interviews in Cairo with well over thirty individuals involved in the movements. This was the heyday of the democratic

experiment, roughly halfway between Hosnī Mubārak's fall and the later military coup that would drop a dark curtain over Egypt's political scene. My interviewees ranged from members of the Muslim Brotherhood—whose candidate was at the time well on the way to winning the presidency—to activists with the other Islamist campaigns that had split off from the Brotherhood, to staunchly conservative Salafis who were operating mainly in civil society. Many of them were influential enough within their organisations that their views were likely to have a long-term impact on the political scene.

Most opted to meet me at some of Cairo's more upscale cafés. The Salafis, in particular, rather stood out in such Westernised surroundings. The men with their long beards could have been transplanted from another century. The women nearly all wore headscarves; one Salafi woman kept her full face covering on for the entire interview, deftly manoeuvring a tall glass coffee mug under it. Many of the Salafis and Islamists had faced severe repression during the time of Mubārak, with frequent interrogations and mistreatment at the hands of the security services. A few remarked that the sort of frank conversation we were having in a public place would have been unthinkable a couple of years earlier.

I was struck by the obviously deep commitment of such people to their religious beliefs and their hopes for Egypt's political future. They were generally well educated and articulate, though in a different way from, for instance, the Shi'ite cleric I had interviewed in Beirut some weeks earlier. Unlike him, they were not deeply trained in an older clerical high culture and were not intoning a rarefied register of Arabic. The largest number had an engineering or computer technology background, even if they were also widely read in the literature on how to apply Islam to modern life. The majority were under forty and clearly part of the internet generation, using various electronic devices that admittedly I had no idea how to use myself. Many had had some experience of travelling abroad, and a few were proficient in foreign languages. While most spoke Arabic with me, a few used quite fluent English. There were also a few instances in which those who had studied Spanish or Chinese wanted to use those languages instead. Such a scene was hardly the norm in Cairo and was far from what many would expect of people of these political persuasions.

This gets to the crux of the issue. Most liberals have an image of Islamists and Salafis as insular and even xenophobic people. Things such as foreign travel and foreign languages are presumed to be inherently liberalising. Indeed, most of the liberals and leftists I met in Cairo took for granted that the more contact one had

with other cultures, the more one would share their own views, in contrast to the more traditional majority of Egyptians. My conversations with the traditionalists suggested that the reality was quite different. I do not pretend that the people with whom I spoke were fully representative of the protesters in Tahrir Square. Amid the crowds and the noise of demonstrations, I saw a few leaflets circulating that had ample references to jihad against the infidels. My interviewees were obviously more educated and had broader experience than the man and woman in the street. But this also meant that they had the capabilities, awareness, and networks to multiply their influence in the long run.

Our conversations dealt largely with how they viewed the rest of the world and their own place in it. Most took an active interest in lessons that Egypt could learn from the experience of other countries. They were suspicious of Western imperialism and some of the excesses of modern Western culture, but they saw much worth studying in the models of Turkey, Malaysia, Brazil, India, and elsewhere, sometimes on matters of economic development and social equality, and sometimes on how to build a workable democracy amid religious diversity. I also probed how they thought about movements and revolutions elsewhere. Many emphatically said that they at least wanted to give moral support to any struggle for freedom and justice in any country, just as they knew many people around the world had sympathised with Egypt's revolution. One Salafi declared that 'any person who revolts against oppression is our partner'. For practical purposes, though, most knew that they had little ability to give concrete aid abroad, at least for the time being.

I also detected some haziness in what kind of solidarity they had in mind. Most consistently, they supported those in other countries who were fighting against authoritarian regimes, whether in other Arab countries or as far afield as China. I also heard some sympathy with the Occupy movement in the West and student protesters in South America, both of whom were trying to make formal democratic institutions more responsive. They also brought up themes of social justice and mentioned that they admired figures as diverse as Mohandas Gandhi and Che Guevara. Many lacked detailed knowledge of exactly how problems of poverty and corruption elsewhere compared to Egypt's plight, however. One young woman with the Muslim Brotherhood, for example, spoke quite fluent Chinese but had the impression from her online language exchanges that the social question was less pressing in China. Vaguest of all was engagement with other traditionalists on a substantive level. While several said in the abstract that the world religions had much in common, they often had little concrete

knowledge of what battles over the contours of modern society fellow traditionalists were fighting elsewhere. In short, their openness to the world was most comprehensive on a political level, middling on a social level, and vaguest on a cultural and moral level.

Despite this shortage of practical knowledge and experience of making common cause with counterparts around the world, the potential was obvious. The majority of them did consider themselves global citizens in the sense of taking an interest in common human problems, even if they were often frustrated by their distance from the circuits of influence that might let them do something about them. They believed that Egyptians, poor though they were, had a moral obligation to aid even worse-off parts of the world such as sub-Saharan Africa. Quite a few also endorsed the idea of democratising structures of global governance such as through direct elections to the United Nations, though they tended to be suspicious of how shadowy interests of wealth and power might block or manipulate such a transition.

All these sentiments of global citizenship were in stark contrast to the prevailing liberal rhetoric about these people. And the frank tone of our conversations across all issues, and their ability to talk through the implications and qualifications of what they were saying, suggested that such views went beyond pious affirmations and had a consistent ethical foundation. That said, much of it remained abstract, since their concrete cooperation with distant others was still very thin, on the level of having attended occasional conferences or having met foreigners through their own work.

Still, there were real hints of what might bring these abstractions to life in due course. A number of my interviewees were members of Salafyo Costa, a fascinating experiment in civil society. It included Salafi Muslims, Coptic Christians, and some supportive leftists and others. These groups had had no contact with one another before the revolution, partly because of unflattering stereotypes and partly because of paranoia about Mubārak's intelligence apparatus. The founders had met for the first time in Tahrir Square as a cross-section of Egyptian society came out to demand Mubārak's ouster. Age-old patterns of mutual suspicion momentarily weakened because of their common political aims. A handful of imaginative souls then decided to try and keep that spirit alive by meeting periodically, at first on the neutral ground of the international café chain, Costa Coffee, from which they rather ironically took their name.

A year later, Salafyo Costa had grown to several hundred active members and

had some twenty thousand fans on its Facebook page. It had also garnered a fair amount of media attention within Egypt. To smooth dialogue, the founders had laid down some strict rules, including not endorsing any specific political party and not getting into aggressive debate about religious doctrines. They all emphasised tolerance, particularly in light of the common experience of having been persecuted, albeit for different reasons, by the former dictatorship. The ties of friendship among the members had deepened. They had also worked together on charitable activities such as distributing food and clothing in the slums of Cairo and the surrounding countryside and giving free medical check-ups. The volunteer teams were deliberately mixed to cause a ‘shock’ and ‘send a message to society’. When patients had their details taken down by a Salafi woman with a face covering and then saw a Coptic Christian eye-doctor named ‘George’, for example, the volunteers were breaking down psychological barriers. Such practical tasks in daily life bound them together across their diversity, far more than any abstract chatting about concepts.

When I asked one of the Copts whether this model could extend transnationally and bring in Buddhists and Hindus, for example, he hit on the crux of the issue. He had not thought about it before as a practical matter, he admitted, but ‘it’s possible, it’s a nice idea’. He then explained that Salafy Costa had gained ground in Egypt because

when we cooperate, we cooperate on something, I mean some sort of goal, like the country, the poor, wanting the revolution to succeed, wanting freedoms, not wanting another military government. So there are some points we agree on, something we can work on. As for doing that with others, Hindus or so on, there aren’t points.... [But] if we were a big organisation, we might think about this, about the environment, about the planet.

A Salafi close to the group, though not formally a member, fleshed it out differently. ‘If a Buddhist or a Hindu recruited me to go up against the oppressor, I would go with him completely’, he declared, just as he admired foreign human rights activists who had died while defending the Palestinians.

On the whole, the willingness to cooperate globally is there, if only a concrete enough common aim presents itself. This question of motivation is crucial. As liberal political theorist Andrew Dobson has put it, appealing to philosophy or goodwill will rarely get people to feel bound to distant others. He suggests that real motivation will come instead from a visible link of cause and effect, such as

when people come to see how the global market binds rich and poor together, often to the detriment of the latter. ‘We are as complicit in their lives as if they sold us their produce over the garden fence. I do not need to exercise “empathy” to see this.’⁷ Of course, the liberal flavour of global interconnectedness and moderate reform is nervous about drawing lines of conflict. Everyone is supposed to be in it together. The world’s economic and moral fault lines do suggest, however, that a sufficiently motivated cosmopolitanism is likely to be a cosmopolitanism with adversaries, even if it also respects those adversaries as moral agents who can change.

In the long run, I suspect that deep cosmopolitans will be motivated most concretely by global injustice, by the social question. When I was talking to these people in Cairo, optimism still filled the air. Most of them were confident that a new popularly elected government would be able to tackle the problems of poverty and corruption. Globalisation could be managed to the benefit of the Egyptian public.

Sad though it may be to say, this optimism was probably misplaced. I do not mean merely that Egyptian democracy was swiftly derailed in the military coup of 2013, which banned the Muslim Brotherhood yet again. That setback may yet unfold in surprising ways, given the staying power of the Islamists in Egypt. I mean rather that one should not expect too much from democratic elections at the national level. The pressures of the global market constrain all governments, and in the long run many a revolutionary hope has been dashed when it comes up against the hard realities of power in the world. If the Arab Spring is part of a larger wave of democratisation, bringing together economic and moral dimensions, then it will play out the same way across countries. That is not to say that new governments with a popular, traditionalist voter base will be unable to deliver anything at all. But given pressure from global forces, it is hard to imagine a vast improvement in the lot of the urban poor and the peasantry.

And this is where the political impetus for a further cosmopolitan turn will arise. In a 2006 article entitled ‘The Calm Before the Storm?’ I argued that globalisation has not put an end to revolution. Formal democracy and integration to the global market will not make people quiescent, because democracy is locked into and constrained by global institutions such as the WTO and the IMF. When yet another generation sees that postrevolutionary governments within each country cannot really deliver, attention will naturally shift upward. Unlike what many leftists think, however, the centre of gravity of the future global alternative probably will not be the likes of the World Social Forum. It will be

people with more traditionalist sensibilities, simply because they represent the largest chunk of world opinion. In that 2006 article, I predicted an eventual global rupture, a revolution of sorts.

This was five years before the Arab Spring and was necessarily an abstract proposition. The Arab Spring is not that revolution, but it is paving the way for it. It paves the way because frustrations at its failure will drive a broadening of horizons. It also paves the way because, as my conversations in Cairo illustrate, a cosmopolitan disposition is gaining ground among the traditionalists. It may well take a generation or so to mature and to crystallise politically. The networks across borders also have to take shape. But if the intense pressure of the social question combines with the imagination of these sorts of people, then the next wave of democratisation, so to speak, will not be national. It will be a wave of movements bypassing unresponsive national governments and demanding democratic accountability in the emerging global political space.

Where does this prospect fit on the trajectory of deep cosmopolitanism that this book has traced?

One crucial difference from the deep cosmopolitans of earlier centuries is that, taking my Cairo interviewees as an example, the high culture dimension is weaker. As I noted, these activists are generally not well versed in the nuances of theology, philosophy, and the like. They often have modern science and engineering backgrounds. This is true of similar movements in other parts of the world. The sophistication of their vision would increase, and with it their ability to engage other traditions, if more humanists got involved. This is where the clerics and other intellectuals of potential deep cosmopolitan sympathies have something to contribute. Real points of contact need thinking through. Even if the legacy of the old civilisations and the old encounters is at our disposal, we still need full debate about how to apply it today.

This will all take time to come about. Traditionalists today have few advantages compared to liberals and leftists. The road to the cosmopolis leads through many battlefields in global civil society. Here we must correct the great weakness of traditionalists, even traditionalists who are somewhat open to cosmopolitanism. At present, they do not talk to one another across cultures nearly enough. They are not a global bloc with global networks. This is one reason why liberals today do not take them seriously as an opposition. Here they are quite unlike the radical left, which readily adapts its fight for social justice to whatever scale works. It has done so in every incarnation from Thomas Paine's activism in England, America, and France in the eighteenth century to the

Communist Internationals of the twentieth. Sympathetic observers of the World Social Forum and other post-Seattle activist networks see them as the next link in a chain of revolutionary movements from 1789 to 1848 to 1917 to 1968. If capitalism has gone global, so must the revolutionaries. According to some, these activist networks pave the way for global political parties.⁸ Of course, such people already have wide transnational ties and speak the same ideological language.

By contrast, traditionalists' networks are largely confined to particular world regions, or at least to particular populations. Without broadening the networks as a first step, nothing else will change. History suggests why. As sociologist Randall Collins explains, the strength of a philosophy or an ideology has depended partly on the intensity of interaction among its leading intellectuals. If they know one another well and collaborate with and challenge each other, they will generate much more creativity and their ideas will gain ground.⁹ By analogy, the same is true of social movements. The sort of insular traditionalists who want to fight separate battles in each civilisation will keep losing ground. Sadly, they will not even be losing a noble and well-waged battle. Isolation is already leading them into a dead end: the loss of universal vision and the mental regression into uniqueness. By networking traditionalist intellectuals and activists across civilisations, along the lines of what my interviewees in Cairo were willing to entertain, we might spark serious reflexion on how jointly to seize the global high ground.

Doing so is no easy matter. Many of the capacities necessary to network this way do not yet exist and will have to be cultivated over a generation. Compared to liberal cosmopolitans, even educated traditionalists know little about each other. Some are more polished and adept at dealing with foreigners than liberals give them credit for, of course. They have what in a business environment has been called 'transnational competence', the ability to read cues across cultures and function in different environments.¹⁰ Many of my contacts in Cairo could have gone anywhere and spoken to anyone. Still, the range has to broaden. For example, the overlap of languages is far from what it could be. Every traditionalist who learns another major world language—other than English, which has become the lingua franca of liberalism—opens up an avenue of encounter. Each word of Arabic learned by a Hindi speaker, and each word of Chinese learned by a Farsi speaker, could be another crack in the edifice of concrete, glass, and neon.

Alongside languages, we also need many more personal contacts and

exposure to different societies. Any collaboration that brings traditionalists to other parts of the world, to meet the likeminded face to face, will go a long way to letting them discover that they are natural allies. Stereotypes need overcoming. Devout, politically active Muslims are often tarred with a harsh brush among Western Christians, for example. While in Cairo, I attended one gathering in which Salafyo Costa hosted a visiting church delegation from Washington, DC. Some of the Americans were astounded to encounter more tolerant views than they were expecting, and I sensed that some of them did not believe what they were hearing. Likewise, a short piece I wrote online at the time for the American traditionalist website *Front Porch Republic* elicited mixed reactions. Some readers were sympathetic to my interviewees; yet one poster was not atypical in dismissing the portrait as due to my having chanced across some exceptional 'nice people'. In the same spirit, there is also a longstanding subset of conservative evangelicals, going back to debates over joining the League of Nations, who look suspiciously on international cooperation. They see it as 'yoke fellowship' that will bind them to unbelievers and dilute their unique message.¹¹

Things will have to start slowly. The first cross-regional networks could be nonpolitical, at least in the strict sense. We could start with alliances around specific short-term aims such as education and poverty relief. If the social question is so pressing around the world, it should get due attention from any movement with a long-term agenda. Eventually these ties could add up to a third track of global civil society. It would rival the two tracks now controlled respectively by the free marketeers and technocrats and by the moderate social democrats.

The popular support base for such traditionalist networking does exist. Most human beings remain nonliberal in their ways of life and their political sensibilities. They are just fragmented and hemmed in by other forces. Civil society organisations that connect with their values and tackle poverty, especially in the global South, would transmit some of their own credibility to the longer-term vision of a postliberal global political order. Ordinary people would be attracted first and foremost if a traditionalist global civil society delivered the goods in daily life. After all, this is exactly how the Muslim Brotherhood built up support among the Egyptian poor over several decades. The experience of cross-cultural collaboration over time would show people the feasibility of a more ambitious political project. There is no reason why the model of Salafis and Copts working together in Egypt could not work just as

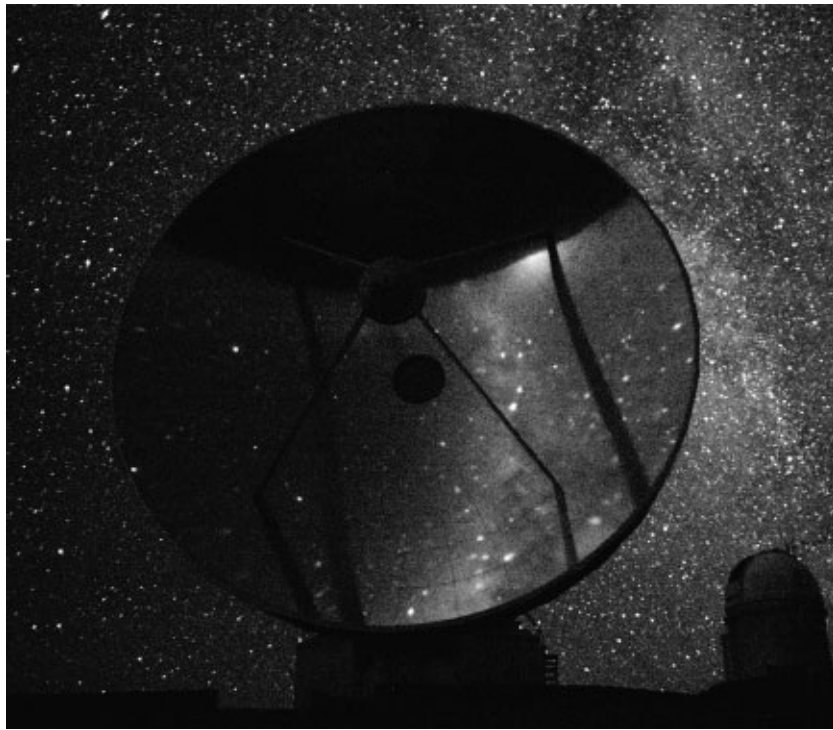
well among, say, Muslims and Christians and Hindus globally.

Perhaps we could imagine building a Traditionalist International informally, from the bottom up. Such a network would transcend territory, binding together people who descend in spirit from the universalisms of the past. I noted much earlier, however, that those enthusiastic about deep cosmopolitanism as an end in itself are likely to remain a minority. To flesh out any alternative to liberalism must involve not only the horizontal fusing of traditions, therefore, but also what we might call a vertical dimension. Within a deep cosmopolitan framework, there is ample room for a diversity of human aims to flourish. In the previous discussion of migration and membership, I argued that small, place-based communities would fare better than they have done under steamrolling nationalisms. But this logic extends to other spheres of life, too. A variety of thinkers—from social theorists such as Max Weber, to communitarians such as Michael Walzer, to theologians such as Abraham Kuyper—have noted that different human pursuits have their own natural spaces and ethical standards: the political, economic, domestic, religious, educational, artistic, and so on.¹²

I do not pretend here to suggest a political theory of a future world state; that would be a book in itself. But we can imagine where the logic of deep cosmopolitanism leads. It breaks the modern obsession with territorial sovereignty while at the same time affirming the traditions. Some of the best spaces for living out one's values have nothing to do with territory. They involve likeminded people being able to give real form to their values, in institutions that enjoy a healthy dose of autonomy: religious bodies, family life, schools, charitable undertakings, and not least the kinds of multidimensional enterprises that might make up an alternative economy of values. Liberalism's fixation on state and individual—at the expense of all the other traditional circuits of human experience—thins out the opportunities for these other spheres to flourish. But imagine a world polity with deep, metaconstitutional commitments to such pluralism—such thick liberties, we might say. It would combine global citizenship, the liberty of free movement, and the ability to take one's values with one anywhere, while still affirming truths that are beyond individual taste. It would be a tapestry of ways of life, transcending the confines of territory. This vision cannot be accommodated fully either by anaemic liberalism, or by the sovereign territorial state, or by the insular and defensive versions of tradition.

Conveniently, such long-term pluralist implications are also quite in keeping with the road leading to them. These diverse spaces in cross-border civil society are the building blocks of a future polity. They are also the proving grounds on

which social and political consciousness can take shape in the meantime. In coming decades, we should expect liberal cosmopolitans to continue advancing with their own projects of global integration, along lines compatible with their interests and ideals. At the same time, traditionalists with expanded horizons also could be networking across the planet, to create a distinct track of global civil society. If so, emerging global political spaces will become battlefields in a global culture war. Just as deep cosmopolitans recover and press the higher aspirations of the past, the social question along with a yearning for richer modes of pluralism will bubble to the surface of world politics. Top and bottom will converge.



The Milky Way above European Southern Observatory telescopes in the Atacama desert. Photo by Nico Housen/ESO, 14 September 2004.

14 Void or Cosmos?

Given all the turmoil of our own time, the world's future political contours are hard to predict. But it does seem very likely that, over the next century or so, new planet-spanning institutions of some sort will emerge. The scale will shift upward in a much more systematic way compared to the improvised global flows of today.

Whatever the shape of future global governance, its consolidation will surely be regarded as one of history's great watersheds. It will be as significant as the spread of settled agriculture or the start of the industrial revolution. As much as it will be a beginning, it will also be an ending. The last two hundred years have witnessed unprecedented turbulence and social change worldwide. As the scale of life has expanded, polities have died and been born, and age-old civilisations have cracked under the onslaught of modernity. While thoughtful people across the political spectrum have long seen modernisation as the birth pangs of a new global order, they have not quite agreed on what that order will look like. Inevitably, history will give us some answers as the clash of visions plays out in the new global political spaces of this century and at least some questions eventually are settled. By the time that happens, we shall know that the rush of ten generations is slowing down. And we shall have a clearer sense of what will fill the centuries stretching out in front of us. Whatever it is, it will not be like what has been seen in recent lifetimes. It may well be tamer, more about conclusions than about possibilities.

When we ponder this prospect, the arguments I have advanced in this book might appear in a rather different light. If the world is to move from a period of flux into a long period of stability, then it greatly raises the stakes of choices we are about to make. In broad terms, the outcome of the global clash between liberalism and the traditions will probably be locked in for some time to come.

That modernity is giving way to something beyond itself is obvious in one sense: rapid economic growth will level off sooner or later. The prediction itself

is old. Even the classical political economists of the early nineteenth century, including John Stuart Mill, foresaw that growth would taper off eventually. Saturation of capital and technical innovation would bring us to a 'stationary state'. The stationary state would be a society at a much higher living standard than before the industrial revolution, but finished with its upward trajectory.¹ In recent decades, some more specific scenarios of an end to growth have come to light. As oil prices rise with higher demand, we shall be forced into sustainable but expensive ways of generating energy. If those costs mean we can no longer 'scale up' the world economy, then we are stuck with something like a fixed capacity. The world population is also ageing such that, when it begins to look more like Japan than like India, the demographic burden will weigh down growth too. And while there are still many more innovations to be wrung out—in energy, transportation, medicine, and the like—there comes a point when they, too, will become less and less frequent.

This probably will be a gradual settling-in, not an abrupt stoppage. We are not going to get to a stationary state in the strict sense within our lifetimes. But I can well imagine people of my cohort looking out, in our old age, on a world in which profit rates are low and long-term income growth has fallen to a quarter of a per cent or so. Brought down to lived experience, that rate means real incomes rise each generation by less than 8 per cent. It is slow enough to feel static from parent to child. The more a society feels like the stationary state, in more ways, then the more the psychological and cultural landscape will look very different from that of the last two centuries.

This need not be a bad thing. Many people have expected a better world to come from reaching a plateau of prosperity. In 1930, the economist John Maynard Keynes wrote:

For at least another hundred years we must pretend to ourselves and to everyone that fair is foul and foul is fair; for foul is useful and fair is not. Avarice and usury and precaution must be our gods for a little longer still. For only they can lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight.²

Keynes was not alone in predicting that the modern rise in living standards would come to an end, and that a more decent society would follow. In a different spirit, Karl Marx expected universal abundance to usher in socialism.³

Plenty of observers today agree that a slowdown from industrial capitalism

could be healthy. People who want society's wealth to be more fairly shared out expect that zero growth means an end to political distraction. The free marketeers have told us for a long time that if another, bigger pie is about to come out of the oven, then we need not quibble over how to cut up the one on the table. With living standards levelling off, we should be forced to have a hard but honest political conversation about fairness. Deeper critics of the modern world take satisfaction from the idea that an end to growth would make people reassess their priorities in general. Even something as simple as rising fuel costs would press us to live and buy more locally. Communities would get stronger as the rush for money and the excesses of the global market are reined in. If wealth is more static, maybe we should all be more content with what we have and focus on more human and spiritual satisfactions. The rise of so-called 'postmaterialist values' among many of the educated and prosperous over the last couple of generations may be one sign that lucre is giving way to a focus on quality of life.⁴

To anyone critical of the modern world, these cultural and political dimensions of an end to growth are intriguing. For too long, the merely material side of our industrial takeoff has got most of the attention. Even the poorer people in rich countries now have food-filled refrigerators and gadgets that their great-grandparents could not have imagined. The poor elsewhere are catching up. The modern world has surely inflicted a rat race on us. But even though the rat is running on a wheel, he is plumper than before. And defenders of free-wheeling capitalism tend to be attentive to plump rats. They dangle, in front of both the plump rat that has long been on the wheel and the gaunt rat just climbing on to it, the same enticing lump of cheese: given time, growth will bring him closer to paradise. Such optimism conveniently distracts from the fact that some rats are plumper than others, of course. Having more plump rats also does not change the fact that the modern world has all too often cultivated rat-hood. This was just Keynes's point about 'avarice and usury' driving growth, at least until growth has served its purpose after a few generations.

What comes afterwards? Will an end to growth get the rat off the wheel and lead to less rat-hood? Are we to be unchained from the mad rush for money of the last century? Or will other but equally chafing chains weigh us down instead?

Consolidation of such a stationary state—both as a society and, potentially, as a polity—should be thought of in very long-term perspective, not just as an adjustment to present-day consumer culture. The trajectory of cosmopolitanism

over more than two thousand years suggests that liberal modernity could well be an aberration in history. The vertigo of rapid technical change has made possible the rise to power of types of people and ways of thinking that were really quite marginal in the old civilisations. Different parts of the world have been thrown together in ways that do not always bear healthy fruit. Rather than a final breakthrough to fourth-order universalism, which we might have expected looking forward from the 1600s, we had an unravelling of the complex civilisations that had evolved up to that point. Liberal modernity sought common ground instead on the level of bedrock humanity. The most fervent reactions against it have involved a mental regression to pre-universalistic thinking. Traditions have been defended in the name of particularity, not human potential—in the name of their possessors rather than their content.

Alongside the slowdown of economic growth, still other considerations suggest that the pendulum could be ready to swing back the other way. In the long run, civilisations go through cycles. One of the richer theories of historical cycles is that put forth by the Russian social theorist Pitirim Sorokin in the 1920s. Sorokin divided these cycles into three phases: ideational, idealistic, and sensate. Ideational societies, such as in the European Middle Ages, focus on spiritual pursuits and the authority of divine revelation. They push material concerns as far aside as possible. Idealistic societies, such as during the Renaissance, bring spiritual and worldly interests together, harmonised through reason. Sensate societies, of which the modern West is an obvious example, focus on material prosperity, often sliding into hedonism and living in the moment because nothing seems permanent. Sorokin predicted in the 1940s that once the sensate phase of fevered indulgence had run its course, exhausted humanity would turn, probably after a cataclysm, back to ideational or idealistic pursuits.⁵

A deep cosmopolitan could hope that this exhaustion of modernity will offer a world-historical chance to get back on track. If growth slows down, many ordinary people would seek other, more humane satisfactions. In thinking about the emergence of a future world civilisation, however, matters get rather more complicated. How would the educated classes respond if the turbulence of the last two centuries petered out? Would the absence of vertigo help them gain a more mature outlook and cause them to turn for guidance to what remains of the old high cultures? Might this be one scenario for turning kings into philosophers, so to speak—thus avoiding the need to do battle globally that I outlined at the end of the last chapter?

The crux of this issue is that there is more than one way to stabilise the world. Any deep cosmopolitan would hope that when you merge civilisations you get the best of each. Perhaps those sitting atop the new cosmopolis will have Christian sympathy, Muslim probity, Hindu perspective, and Confucian perseverance. Perhaps they will live as Ricci and Abū'l-Faḥr would have lived if given advanced medicine, the internet, and the ability to fly all over the world. But we could just as easily end up in a much darker future. What happens if, instead of the kings becoming philosophers, they react to the slowdown by tightening the screws to lock in their own advantages? Then we might have the overreaching Faustianism of the West, the sharp bargaining of the Middle East, the petty status-consciousness of South Asia, and the conformist insularity of East Asia. The new world order would look alarmingly like a Singaporean corporate office.

Of course, I do not want to pick on Singapore unfairly. But Singapore's elite may well foreshadow the world's elite under a stationary state in the darker scenario. That prosperous city-state has been stuck for two generations in a moneyed soft authoritarianism with politically infantile consumer-subjects. Despite its prosperity, it ranked bottom in the world in a 2012 Gallup survey of how often average people feel positive emotions.⁶ Yet those in power in Singapore pride themselves on being a perfect meritocracy. Top scorers on the university entrance exam get lifetime perks. Such people have a hard edge, too. A few years ago, the teenage daughter of a Singaporean politician sparked a scandal with a blog posting that told 'the sadder class'—those not lifted into the social stratosphere in their youth—to 'get out of my elite uncaring face'. Her father's apology hardly went beyond saying that she had to learn more tact.⁷

Softer versions of such status-consciousness and credential-seeking abound elsewhere in the world as well. At elite universities in the West, there are more and more of what journalist David Brooks has called 'organisation kids'.⁸ I remember a dinner a few years ago with some of my Harvard freshmen. After these generally likable and intelligent youngsters went on for rather too long about investment banking, I asked them what they would do if they were given a year off and complete freedom. I was hoping for a chink that might let something break out of the careerist mould. But the most common answer involved getting one or another credential to advance them in the rat race. One has to keep up, or get ahead, after all.

When the stationary state settles down, some of the screws will tighten. Despite the misgivings I have expressed throughout this book, I will readily

acknowledge that the modern world has thrived in a few narrow respects. This is largely because it has welcomed the entrepreneurial spirit, in a broad sense. Status has not been a given, and there have been many avenues of self-made distinction. In large patches of the world, the eccentric have found it fairly easy to opt out of one or another hierarchy. Capitalism has spread a soulless consumerism, but it has also rewarded dynamism and innovation. If one lives in a world of stable expectations and large-scale bureaucracy, however, then a very different sort of personality flourishes. Stratified stability punishes risk-taking and rewards the servile pleasing of authority. A stationary state that evolves out of liberal globalisation would have some slowing of the present rat race to wring ever more baubles from consumer culture. But the energy of rat-hood might merely be displaced into petty hierarchies, status-consciousness, and credential-seeking.

Today's kings will probably not become philosophers. If they continue in power, they are much more likely to consolidate a soft and pragmatic despotism, the inertia of the spiritually exhausted. Their kind of world state would be that most feared by thoughtful people of the past. As Toynbee described in his theory of the rise and fall of civilisations, often 'a disintegrating civilisation purchases a reprieve by submitting to forcible political unification in a universal state'. Another historian of civilisations, David Wilkinson, said that the most likely fate of the present world order is evolution 'toward a unitary, authoritarian, bureaucratic, peaceable, élitist, and sterile world state'. The worldview prevailing within it would be, based on present trends, 'individualistic, alienated, manipulative, technical, hedonistic, rationalistic, inquisitive, bureaucratic, [and] bourgeois'.⁹

Much hangs in the balance, therefore. This century is one of history's pressure points. The scale of future political organisation and the horizons of the educated classes are more or less given. They will be global. But the content could be radically different, depending on whether liberal globalisation is locked in or whether we can revive the deep cosmopolitan trajectory of earlier world history. Either way, we should expect the resulting world civilisation to last a long time, evolving only slowly once consolidated.

Part of the reason it would evolve slowly is that its scale would put it in a very different position from that of any of its predecessors. As we saw early in this book, the old regional civilisations were easy to confuse with Civilisation as such, because they seemed like universes unto themselves. Contact with barbarians beyond the frontier or with other civilisations was sporadic at best.

Still, the old civilisations did have an outside, which often burst in from the frontiers to upset the complacent. As encounters among civilisations picked up pace, and first- and second-order universalisms turned into third- and even fourth-order universalisms, the outside came to matter more.

For the first time in history, a future world civilisation and world state would have no obvious outside. Its evolution would be driven wholly from within. Yet we might extend this line of thinking a bit further in potentially illuminating ways. Remember that the literal meaning of ‘cosmopolitan’ is a ‘citizen of the cosmos’. At the risk of pushing my readers on to uncomfortable terrain, I do want to raise some more speculative questions. Suppose that, as most scientists now believe, humanity is not alone in the universe. If there are outsiders, however distant, in what sense might we consider ourselves citizens of the same cosmos? What would such common ground even mean? The liberal cosmopolitan and the deep cosmopolitan would have starkly different answers to this question.

It is not hard to find evidence of how people shaped by liberal cosmopolitan culture view this issue. The vast majority of elite scientists are products of the societies and the classes that feel most at home in the globalisation of concrete, glass, and neon. Some of them have speculated on what would happen if humanity could confirm the existence of extraterrestrial civilisations. In 1994, a conference was called by the network of scientific organisations known as the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI). SETI participants, most of them from leading universities and research institutes, in recent decades have poured considerable resources into trying to pick up radio signals from deep space, as a sign of other technologically advanced civilisations. So far, they have come up emptyhanded.

The 1994 SETI conference drew together experts from the natural and social sciences to explore the likely societal impact if such a signal were detected. Their report was not especially sophisticated or innovative in its reasoning, but it did reveal certain assumptions. It compared such a discovery to the earlier Copernican or Darwinian revolutions, both of which fundamentally changed humanity’s view of its place in the universe. It said that confirmation of intelligent extraterrestrial life could be a tremendous shock to human cultures. The report also distinguished between the sort of people likely to be open to the idea and those most likely to be shattered and disoriented. The ‘educated’, as the report put it, were already comfortable with the prospect and would probably welcome it. Traditionalists, particularly fundamentalist Christians, would feel

most threatened by such a challenge to their worldview. In the same vein, a psychological study a few years later claimed that people with stronger religious beliefs were less likely than agnostics or atheists to think that extraterrestrial intelligence exists and more likely to think that if it does exist, it will prove malevolent.¹⁰

Sometimes predictions say rather more about underlying assumptions than about their subject matter. Those serious authors who have reflected on a future encounter with extraterrestrial civilisations tend to have a rather thin view of the ethical dimension. International relations expert Jonathan F Galloway argued that, much as among countries, such an encounter would be shaped by the tension between mutual suspicion and practical hopes for cooperation, but would not generate any new ethical thinking. Historian Luca Codignola compared such an event to the post-1492 encounter between Europe and America, in that it might wreak biological havoc and would be hard to prepare ourselves for in advance. Geographer Seth D Baum said that advanced extraterrestrials might well have a cooperative disposition, since they would probably have died out otherwise. Beyond the prospect of gaining scientific knowledge, however, he identified little prospect for ethical dialogue. Rather, if ethics entered the equation at all, it would be some sort of mechanistic judgement about how well the other party does ethically by one's own yardstick, followed by obvious conclusions about whether they deserve to survive when push comes to shove.¹¹

Many predictions include thinly veiled enthusiasm about the disruption to traditional religion that supposedly would follow an encounter. Philosopher Roland Puccetti has listed all the historical particularities of the monotheistic faiths and the reasons why he thinks they could not be extended outward into the universe. The confirmation of intelligent extraterrestrial life would doom them to absurdity. Physicist and SETI chair Paul Davies has argued that either advanced extraterrestrials would have no religion at all, having given it up as mythology, or they would have a vastly more evolved one, such that human religions would be abandoned in favour of its surpassing insights. 'Either way', he says, 'it is hard to see how the world's great religions could continue in anything like their present form should an alien message be received.' The French biologist Jacques Monod has waxed more eloquently about the shock to tradition.

The ancient covenant is in pieces: man at last knows that he is alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe, out of which he has emerged only by chance. Neither his destiny nor his duty have been written down.¹²

The circles of modern science and academic philosophy are overwhelmingly atheist or at least agnostic and are broadly at home with liberal modernity. The conclusions about SETI's characterisation of potential impact are not really new. They reflect the assumptions of their cultural milieu. We see the ethical vacuum, the dethroning of traditional wisdom as arbitrary, and a certain satisfaction in throwing humanity back on its own paltry resources. Apart from confirming such opinions, the ethical implications of any future contact are, for those of such a persuasion, rather unimportant. They hope that contact would make strife among nations seem trivial and would spark more interest in human unity and cooperation. And they welcome the discrediting of what they see as hidebound traditional beliefs about human beings' central position in the universe. Extraterrestrials would humble us, as it were.

Far more important to these writers is the material dimension of what contact would give us. They are optimistic about any transmission of scientific and technical knowledge that could come, even only through radio signals over vast distances. They also believe that contact would confirm some of their assumptions about the nature of life. Davies argues that, since life on earth is but a random aggregation of atoms, the same universal process replicated on other planets would lead to equally unremarkable recurrences of intelligence. He calls these the principles of uniformity and mediocrity.¹³

Puccetti and social psychologist Albert Harrison argue that communication with extraterrestrials would have as one of its least valuable aspects knowledge of their social organisation. Evolutionary pressures would drive intelligent creatures of any stripe towards similar social systems, which would resemble the efficiency of human technocracies in the long run. Their minds would have a similar ability to reflect and to make rational choices. Since the mind is but an outgrowth of the body, core ethical commitments would be invariable and rooted in the demands of biological survival: prohibitions on murder, limited altruism, and perhaps a rough equality. Anything of a higher order emerges from those building blocks.¹⁴

Such reasoning leads to a definite though limited view of what constitutes a person, in a more than just human sense. Puccetti says personhood consists of rational thought, combined with subjective states of consciousness such as awareness of pain. Biological traits come from evolution to fit one's physical environment. The qualities of a moral subject arise from the habits necessary to maximise pleasure and avoid pain. Davies finds only one thing remarkable about human consciousness, and presumably about the consciousness of any other

intelligent creatures. He notes that the building blocks of the universe—its physical-mathematical laws—are often elegantly simple but not obvious from sensory experience. Only when a species develops brains capable of abstraction can it reason through and confirm such laws. The highest consciousness and the most fundamental bases of the physical world connect, in a full circle.¹⁵

Across all of these observations, we find a deeply entrenched outlook that could only come out of the modern world. Personhood consists of functions grounded in biology. Ethics arises from practical imperatives. Life has no purpose beyond survival and efficiency. Intelligent persons have in common only their physical impulses and some faculties that help them navigate their surroundings. Anything grander is mere mythmaking and froth on the surface. This outlook on the cosmos and other would-be citizens of it dovetails with the thin universalism of liberal modernity. On our planet, it rests on a bedrock humanity. Off it, it rests on a bedrock personhood, for lack of a better term.

It is obvious that such writers take a rather narrow view of the matter. Less obviously, they also overlook a long history of reflexion on something very like the questions they raise. Interest in intelligent extraterrestrial life did not, contrary to many impressions, start with atheist scientists in the twentieth century. As historian of science Michael J Crowe has traced in a masterful overview, many of the leading European intellectual figures of the last several centuries have been deeply curious about the possibility of intelligent beings beyond earth. Unlike the SETI crowd, however, most of them paid attention not to the biological bedrock, but to the ethical and religious implications. Their curiosity was suffused with metaphysics. If such creatures existed, what was their relationship to the God of Christianity? Did they have souls? How could they be saved if the incarnation of Christ happened only on earth, in an impoverished corner of Palestine? Did one incarnation have cosmic import? Or could there have been multiple incarnations, one on each planet in its due time? The thinkers reflecting on these theological issues never settled on an answer, though many fell back on a more abstract form of deism.¹⁶

Everything I traced in the first half of this book was terrestrial. First-, second-, third-, and fourth-order universalisms were about other human beings, beyond the frontier of one's own civilisation but still part of the same moral universe. The current of curiosity about extraterrestrial life that Crowe digs up from centuries past is quite compatible with what I have shown, however. The old universalisms recognised other worthy creatures based on their potential for virtue, not for their raw biological impulses and content-free rationality. As such,

they could extend quite naturally to non-human others. The musings of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Christian theologians about the souls of extraterrestrials is in the same vein as Ricci's respect for Confucian scholar-officials. He wanted to engage their consciences, not merely certify their ability to calculate and copulate.

The same traditionalists who most scientists think will be traumatised by a discovery of extraterrestrial civilisations are, ironically, often quite open to the idea. The Catholic Church and many Muslim theologians have accepted that such creatures could well exist and that they could have souls, in the same relationship to God as are human beings. And extraterrestrials have figured prominently in some Christian-themed novels, including the science fiction writings of C S Lewis, as a counterpoint to human failings, often as if they had never fallen from Paradise. One novel from the 1950s, James Blish's *A Case of Conscience*, follows in a long line of Catholic engagement across gulfs of time and space. It depicts a Jesuit biologist who, when deposited in 2050 on a planet with intelligent reptilian creatures, spends most of the novel agonising over the state of their souls and the ethical messages being exchanged between them and human beings.¹⁷

This theme of what even counts as a soul finds some provocative analogies in the scientific and philosophical debates over consciousness. Many experts on the topic suggest that the 'easy' problem of consciousness is that of how the brain processes information, reacts to stimuli, and the like. It is easy because such functions are likely, in the long run, to be accessible to empirical study. The 'hard' problem is why we have consciousness itself, as subjective experience, in the first place. Philosopher David J Chalmers ably distils the issue.¹⁸ 'Why should physical processing give rise to a rich inner life at all? It seems objectively unreasonable that it should, and yet it does.' 'Why doesn't all this information-processing go on "in the dark", free of any inner feel?' As a thought experiment, a number of philosophers have considered whether there could be such a thing as a 'philosophical zombie': a creature with the same biological complexity and outwardly observable behaviour, but based entirely on mechanistic, instinctive responses and no inner consciousness. If a philosophical zombie could exist, then consciousness must be something more than the purely physical.

While many scientists and philosophers think consciousness can be wholly explained away based on physical processes, Chalmers goes as far as the modern scientific worldview can go in seeing it as more than that. But that is still not

very far. He outlines a ‘naturalistic dualism’ in which consciousness is somehow related to the physical world but not wholly reducible to it, any more than other basic building blocks of reality such as mass, charge, and space-time can be reduced. In explaining his view, he offers plenty of disclaimers. ‘It is an innocent version of dualism.... There is nothing particularly spiritual or mystical about this theory.’

Contrast such an approach with that of the Dutch philosopher Jacob Klapwijk’s argument for ‘emergent evolution’, such that the moral self is much greater than its Darwinian material substrate:

It must have been an overwhelming turning-point when, from among all the hominids that had wandered on earth, the first human being elevated itself, staggering under the weight of newly felt responsibility and answerability. Made answerable and responsible by whom? The neo-cortex, already enlarged in *Homo erectus*, appears to have grown out into a receiver dish tuned in to signals from the Eternal.¹⁹

As far as I am aware, these debates over what consciousness is and whether it has a non-material, even spiritual, dimension have not been linked explicitly to the topic of extraterrestrial intelligence. Yet the underlying assumptions at both ends are instructive. In effect, the modern mainstream approach pushes extraterrestrial consciousness—with all its spiritual implications—to the periphery. It implies that from a human standpoint, extraterrestrials might as well be philosophical zombies. The underlying assumptions map tightly on to the culture of liberal modernity. Yet the older lines of thinking held that, if one were going to think about extraterrestrials at all, then extraterrestrial consciousness was by far the most important issue. After all, it is on that inner consciousness, amounting to something more than a mere physical mechanism, that the whole range of virtue and moral responsibility is pegged. It is there that the real common ground lies, not in natural selection and radio waves. Deep cosmopolitanism thus looks out at the universe in a distinctive way, extending the same logic that it applies to intercivilisational encounters on earth.

No one can be sure that contact with intelligent and virtuous non-humans will ever happen, even in the perhaps disappointing form of a few electrons across thousands of light years. Scientists are puzzled by the so-called Fermi Paradox: given the probably vast number of habitable planets in the universe, and the biological processes that should lead to life and in turn to intelligence on some of

them, why have we found no sign that they exist?²⁰ Various answers have been suggested. One is that life—or at least intelligent life—for some reason arises much more rarely than now thought. A second is that communications technology quickly passes beyond the stage at which signals spill out detectably in all directions, again falling silent. A third is that, in shades of Sorokin's sensate and ideational cycles, any intelligent species will turn from technology back to spirituality soon after realising the horrors of excessive materialism. A fourth is that advanced civilisations regularly arise but, on reaching a stage of ravenous technological hubris, soon kill themselves off in an apocalypse. And a fifth is that, since our present mentality seems to be setting us up for the fourth scenario ourselves, we are being prudently left alone for the time being. I have no basis for judging which of these explanations, if any, are likely. But they do put the range of trajectories for our own future world civilisation in a sobering light.

Odd though the choice may have seemed a few pages ago, I have followed this speculative line of reasoning because I think it throws into sharper relief the persistent difference between a deep and a superficial cosmopolitanism. Whichever stamp is put on it, the coming world civilisation will probably be a stationary state, certainly compared to the turbulence of the last two centuries. If it locks in the globalisation of concrete, glass, and neon—and if it survives its own impulses to excess—then it will peer out beyond the 'frontier' at an ethically empty universe, even if it knows that universe is populated by countless living creatures. Yet if it revives the spirit of the old civilisations, it will look out on a myriad of avenues for continuing the age-old reflexions about our purpose. One life-filled universe is an argument for a death of the spirit. Another life-filled universe encourages us to take up our citizenship in the cosmos and to marvel at what awards it to us.

Notes

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Index

- Abū'l Faḥr 95–9, 101, 103, 158–9, 187
Acton, Lord 112
Aeneid 21
Africa 39, 49–50, 62, 64, 65, 67, 108, 112, 113–14, 116, 124, 125, 130, 131, 155, 190
Akbar the Great 86, 95–9, 185
al-Amin, Muhammad Hassan 157
al-Andalus *see* Spain
Alexander the Great 66, 77–9, 83, 87, 105
Almohad dynasty 62
alternative history 111–16
Americas, conquest of 68–77
Amerindians 67, 69, 70–3, 75, 76
Anderson, Benedict 107
anthropology 102, 110, 140–1, 149
Appiah, Kwame Anthony 4–5, 10, 120, 138, 139
Aquinas, St Thomas 48, 53, 87, 143, 150
Arab Spring 182, 188–92
Arabic language 62, 98, 186
Arabs 49, 59–60, 62, 64, 65, 113, 134
Arendt, Hannah 187
Aristotle 20, 21, 48, 71–2, 77, 78, 87, 99, 143
Asoka 28
Assassins (sect) 84
astronomy 92
Athens versus Jerusalem 166
Augustus Caesar 22
Australia 112, 113, 115
Axial Age 30, 45, 74, 106, 141, 143, 145, 147, 151
Aztec empire 68–9, 74, 76

Badā'ūnī, 'Abd al-Qādir 97, 98, 101, 150, 165
Badawī, Fawzī 25–7
Baghdad 82, 84, 87, 177
Ban Chao 15, 16, 25, 26, 34, 35

al-Bannā, Ḥassan 133–4, 157
barbarians 15, 23, 33–42, 46, 47, 49, 56, 59, 69, 70, 72, 75, 78, 80
Barber, Benjamin 7
Baum, Seth D 202–3
Benda, Julien 149
Beirut 186
Beijing Olympics 2
Berbers 62
Bhagavad Gita 28, 88, 151
Bilgrami, Akeel 155
Bīrūnī, Abū Rayḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad 87–8, 99
Blish, James 205
Bloom, Allan 7, 148
Borrmans, Maurice 157
bourgeoisie 3, 107, 110–11, 150, 161, 201
Bradford 175
brahmins *see* caste system
Brazil 113, 118, 125, 132, 189
Britain 39, 69, 82, 108, 109, 112–13, 114, 115, 116, 123, 131, 169, 173, 174, 175, 177, 193
British National Party 173
Brooks, David 200
brown racism 130, 131
Buchanan, Patrick 169
Buddhism 1–2, 28, 33, 51, 53–6, 79, 84, 92, 94, 101, 158, 191
Burma 109
Bush, George W 139
Byzantine empire 46–7, 49, 51, 61–2

Cairo 182, 188–92, 194
Calhoun, Craig 170
Callahan, William A 128
Cambridge University 115
Canada 113
Canary Islands 67
Carthage 21, 38
caste system 27, 28, 41, 42, 79, 88
Castells, Manuel 3
Catholic Church 47–8, 68, 69, 75, 76, 82, 89, 93, 156, 175, 186, 187, 205
Cato the Younger 18–22
Celts 39–40, 79
central Asia 1, 15, 33, 34, 35, 49, 59, 60, 80, 81–2, 83, 84, 127
chakravartin (universal kingship) 42, 79
Chalmers, David J 205
Chang Chun 81
character-centred cosmopolitanism 162–3

Charles V 71, 76–7
Charles, Prince of Wales 115
Chase-Dunn, Christopher 122
Chesterton, G K 7, 160
Chicago, University of 148
China: ancient civilisation 23–7, 37, 42, 52–3; Chinese language 29, 127–8, 144, 179;
Christian missionary encounters 89–95, 98–103, 108; contacts with India 1–2; contemporary
rise 2–3, 125, 126–33; discourse of uniqueness 127, 130, 132, 144–5; European imperialism
108–10; language policy 179; modern secularism 163; nationalism 109, 126, 127, 128, 129,
130; premodern frontiers 15–17, 33–8; present régime 126, 129, 130, 132; racial attitudes
37–8, 109, 130–3, 145, 176; religious minorities 52–6; strategic culture 127; visits by
mediæval Muslims 60; *see also* Confucianism; Mongol empire; Zheng He
China Can Say No (book) 126
Christianity: as faith 10, 45–6, 71–2, 102, 106, 154–5, 156, 157, 160, 161, 166, 200;
Christendom as civilisation 46–9, 51–2, 53, 61, 62–4, 73, 74, 75, 123–4, 128, 194; overseas
missionaries 54, 69–74, 81–2, 89–94, 108; views on extraterrestrial life 202, 204–5
Cicero 18–25
city-state 18, 20, 21, 23, 39, 40, 77, 171
civic particularism 169–72
civil society (global) 122, 130, 166, 193, 194, 195
Codignola, Luca 202
Coles, Romand 164
Collins, Randall 193
colonialism (modern European) 11, 68–77, 108–16
Columbus, Christopher 67, 68
Confucianism 23–7, 34, 36, 37, 52–3, 56, 65, 75, 84, 89, 90–4, 109, 127, 128–30, 133, 144,
185, 200
Confucius 23, 24, 25, 93
Confucius Institutes 127–8
conquistadores *see* Americas, conquest of
consciousness 205–6
Constantine 46
Constantinople 46, 47, 61, 88
convivencia *see* Spain
Copernican revolution 202
Coptic Christians 190, 191, 194
Cortés, Hernán 68–9, 76–7
cosmopolitanism *see* deep cosmopolitanism; liberal cosmopolitanism
counterculture (1960s) 116
Crowe, Michael J 204, 205
crystallisation (of truths in culture) 30, 33, 42, 45, 59, 101, 103, 146–7, 184, 185
Cuba 68
cultural property debates 145
Cynics 10

da Silva, Luiz Inácio 118
Dallmayr, Fred 149
Danish cartoons of Muḥammad 175
Dante Alighieri 48
Daoism 53–4, 55, 81, 92, 129
Dār al-Harb 61
Dār al-Islām 61, 63
Darius III 77, 78
Darwinian evolution 145, 202, 206
Darwinism 110, 126, 130, 145
Davies, Paul 203, 204
Davos 187
decolonisation 112–17
deep cosmopolitanism (conceptualisations) 11, 12, 103, 137, 138, 139, 146, 162–7, 184–5, 187–8
Deneen, Patrick 171
dharma 27, 41
dhimmis 51–2, 61, 63, 75
Diagne, Blaise 113
Din-i Ilahi 96
Disney 4
Dobson, Andrew 191
Dominicans 94, 103
Dong Zhongshu 26
Douglas, Mary 102
Dower, Nigel 137–8
D’Souza, Dinesh 148

economic growth scenarios 125, 126, 197–9
Edict of Caracalla 40
Edict of Toleration 46
education (as deep cosmopolitan strategy) 151
Egypt 75, 133–4, 159, 188–92, 194
England *see* Britain
English language 2, 126, 179, 194
Esack, Farid 155
Euben, Roxanne 149
Eucharist 82, 100
Europe *see* Roman empire; Christendom; European Union; *and under individual countries*
European Central Bank 121
European Court of Human Rights 123, 173
European Union 13, 123–5, 134, 170, 171, 172, 183
euroscepticism 123, 124, 169, 170–1
Eurozone debt crisis 170
examination system (China) 14, 23, 55, 84

experience-near and experience-distant concepts [102](#)
extraterrestrial intelligence [202–7](#)

Falk, Richard [122](#)

Fang Lizhi [145–6](#)

Fang Xiaoru [38](#)

al-Fārābī, Abū Naṣr [87](#)

Farage, Nigel [169](#)

al-Fārūqī, Ismāʿīl [155](#)

Fatehpur Sikri [98](#)

Ferdinand (king) [63](#)

Fermi paradox [206](#)

first-order universalism [30–1](#), [45](#), [59](#), [74](#), [75](#), [100](#), [103](#), [105](#), [141](#), [201](#), [204](#)

Florentine Codex [68–9](#)

Forster, E M [108](#)

fourth-order universalism [98](#), [101](#), [105](#), [111](#), [141](#), [143](#), [159](#), [199](#), [201](#), [204](#)

France [51](#), [82](#), [112](#), [113](#), [114](#), [115](#), [123](#), [131](#), [163](#), [193](#)

Franciscans [81](#)

French Revolution [109](#)

Freud, Sigmund [157](#)

Freyre, Gilberto [113](#)

Front Porch Republic (website) [194](#)

frontier romances [64](#)

Fujian [55](#), [64](#), [94](#)

Funabashi Yoichi [3](#)

G7 countries [125](#)

G20 countries [125](#)

Galloway, Jonathan F [202](#)

Gan Ying [15–16](#)

Gandhi, Mohandas [155](#), [190](#)

Gates, Henry Louis [148–9](#)

Geertz, Clifford [140](#)

Gellner, Ernest [107](#)

genealogy of liberalism [10–11](#), [120–1](#)

Genghis Khan [80](#), [81](#), [83](#), [84](#)

George, Robert P [166](#)

Germany [39–40](#), [46](#), [47](#), [48](#), [64](#), [72](#), [112](#), [114](#)

global culture, current lack of [184](#)

global justice movement [187](#)

globalisation (contemporary) [3–13](#), [121–2](#), [146](#), [176](#), [183](#), [184](#), [185](#), [187](#), [192](#), [197](#), [201](#)

Golwalkar, M S [133](#)

Great Books debate [147–51](#)

Great Wall of China [32](#), [35](#)

Greece (premodern) [10](#), [20](#), [21](#), [22](#), [39](#), [45](#), [46](#), [48](#), [61](#), [67](#), [70](#), [75](#), [77](#), [87](#), [166](#)

Griffin, Nick 173
Guangzhou (African immigration to) 131, 177
Guénon, René 159
guesthood (attitude to immigration) 176–7
Guevara, Ernesto Che 190
Gupta, Dipankar 139

Habsburg dynasty 48, 76, 77, 87, 89, 95, 111
Hadrian's Wall 39
Ḥāfīz-i Abrū 60
Han dynasty 15–17, 23, 25, 26, 33, 34, 35, 53
Han Yu 54
Hannerz, Ulf 170
Harrison, Albert 203–4
Hārūn al-Rashīd 61
Harvard University 109, 200
Hassan, Riffat 157
Hellenistic era 78–9
Hick, John 154–5
Hill, Jason 5
Hinduism *see* India
Hizbullah 186
Hodgen, Margaret 110
Holy Roman Empire 48, 76
Hong Kong 172
honour 6, 18, 20, 25, 64
Hu Jintao 118
human rights 119, 122, 123, 124, 145, 173, 191
Huxley, Aldous 159
hybridisation (as demographic future) 177–8

‘Ibādat Khāna debates 96–7, 98, 99, 101, 164–5
Ibn Baṭūṭa 50, 60, 61–2
Ibn Khaldūn 61
Ilkhanate dynasty 80
Imperial Federation proposals 112–13, 115
Inca empire 68, 74, 75
India: Akbar 89, 95–8; Alexander the Great's incursion 77, 78; ancient civilisation 27–30, 41–2, 52–3; colonial era 108–9, 113, 114–6; contacts with ancient Mediterranean 16, 17, 79; contemporary rise 125, 133; Hindu nationalism 133; land protectionism 180; modern secularism 163; Pakistan border 2; pilgrimages 1–2; visit by Bīrūnī 87–8; visit by Ibn Baṭūṭa 60
Indian Ocean 16, 59–60, 64, 67
Indus River 77
industrial revolution 89, 107–8, 110, 114, 116, 143, 197, 198–9

inequality (global) 11, 89, 108–10, 125, 169, 187–8, 191–2, 198
insularity problem 134, 135, 174
International Monetary Fund 121
interreligious dialogue (contemporary) 154–8
Ireland 47
Isabella (queen) 63
Islam 49–50, 87, 106, 139, 149, 155, 156–7, 200; views on extraterrestrial life 205; *see also*
interreligious dialogue (contemporary); Muslim world
Islamism 133, 134, 158, 173, 186, 188, 189, 192

Jacques, Martin 131
Jains 79, 96
James, William 6
Japan 67, 129, 131
Jaspers, Karl 30
Jesuits *see* Ricci, Matteo
Jesus 46–7, 48, 52, 54, 63, 69, 92, 155, 156, 157, 160, 161, 204
John Paul II 186
Johnston, Alasdair Iain 127
Judaism 45, 50, 51–2, 55–6, 61, 62–3, 79, 106, 113, 119–21, 156–7, 166
Julius Caesar 16, 18, 19, 22
Juvaynī, Aṭā-Malik 84

Kaifeng 14, 55–6
Kangxi (emperor) 92–3
Kenya 132
Keynes, John Maynard 198
Khitan *see* Liao dynasty
Klapwijk, Jacob 206
Kohut, Heinz 102
Korea 131, 144
Krieger, David J 155
Krishna 88
Kristeva, Julia 5
ksatriya see caste system
Kublai Khan 82
Küng, Hans 137, 138
Kushan empire 16, 28
Kuyper, Abraham 195

Las Casas, Bartolomé de 71–3
Latin 21, 29, 47, 107, 147
Latin America 125, 130, 131, 186, 190
Laws of Manu 27–8, 30, 41
layers within a tradition 99–102, 150, 158, 162, 165

League of Nations 194
Lebanon 158, 186
Legalists (Fajia) 26, 129
Lei Yi 128
Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm 106
Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim 106
Lewis, C S 205
Liang Xiaosheng 126
Liao dynasty 35–6, 41
liberal cosmopolitanism 4–7, 10–12, 105, 110–11, 120–2, 138–9, 142, 146, 149, 154, 185, 195, 202
liberation theology 155, 186
Libya 188
Liu Zaifu 5
localism (within deep cosmopolitanism) 178–81
lost causes 12–13
Lou Jing 130–1
Lusotropicalism 113

Ma Huan 65
MacIntyre, Alasdair 143, 149, 170
Macmillan, Harold 112
Magellan, Ferdinand 69–70
Maigrot, Charles 93–4, 97, 99, 101, 150, 165
Malaysia 189
Manent, Pierre 171
Manichæism 53, 54–5, 85, 92
Manu, Laws of *see* [Laws of Manu](#)
Marchetti, Raffaele 183
Marcus Aurelius 22–3, 39
Mark Antony 19
Marxism 122, 157, 198
Mecca 50, 64, 65, 98, 100, 155
Medina 155
Megasthenes 79
Mencius 23, 24, 25, 36, 53, 150
Mexico 68–9, 71, 72, 73–5, 76, 77, 125
Middle East 16, 28, 40, 50, 54, 59, 80, 82, 89, 108, 124, 130, 131, 173, 178, 186, 200; *see also* [Muslim world](#)
migration debates 113, 115, 116, 131, 169, 172–80
Milinda's Questions 79
Mill, John Stuart 197
Miller, David 170
millet system *see* [dhimmis](#)
Ming dynasty viii, 38, 56, 60, 64, 65, 89, 91, 92, 99, 111

Moctezuma [69](#), [74](#), [76](#), [77](#)
Modern Age (quarterly) [161](#)
Möngke Khan [81](#)
Mongol empire [26](#), [38](#), [56](#), [64](#), [80–5](#), [88](#)
Monod, Jacques [203](#)
monotheism [45–52](#)
Morocco [49](#), [62](#), [140](#)
Morris, Edward E [112–13](#)
Moses [45](#)
Mubarak, Hosni [182](#), [188](#), [190](#)
mudéjars [63](#)
Mughal dynasty [89](#), [95](#), [97](#), [98](#), [108](#), [111](#)
Muḥammad [49–51](#), [65](#), [98](#), [155](#), [175](#)
Muslim Brotherhood [134](#), [157](#), [188](#), [190](#), [192](#), [194](#)
Muslim world: early expansion [46](#), [49](#), [61](#), [62](#); modern political movements [133–4](#), [139](#), [153](#),
[155](#), [156–7](#), [186–94](#); premodern civilisation [50](#), [61](#), [87–8](#), [111](#); racial attitudes [61](#); religious
minorities [50–2](#), [62](#), [63](#), [95](#), [158](#); *see also* [Abū'l Faḏl](#); [Islam](#); [Islamism](#); [Mongol empire](#);
[Zheng He](#); *and individual countries*

Nahua debate [73–4](#)
Naipaul, V S [3](#)
Nandy, Ashis [149–50](#)
Nanjing [56](#), [64](#), [89](#)
Naoroji, Dadabhai [114](#)
Nathan the Wise (play) [106](#)
natural law [23](#), [30](#), [62](#), [72](#), [73](#), [90](#), [94](#)
Navarrete, Domingo Fernández [94](#), [97](#), [99](#)
Nestorian Christians [53](#), [54](#), [82](#), [85](#), [177](#)
Netherlands [60](#), [76](#), [112](#), [123](#)
new class [4](#), [166](#)
new constitutionalism [121](#)
Nicholas of Cusa [88](#), [155](#)
Nietzsche, Friedrich [157](#)
Nikephoros [61](#)
North America [125](#)

Occupy movement [189](#)
Opium Wars [108](#), [126](#)
Orwell, George [109](#)
Ottoman empire [51](#), [88](#), [89](#), [95](#), [109](#), [111](#), [177](#)

Paine, Thomas [193](#)
Panikkar, Raimundo [157](#)
Parens, Joshua [171](#)
Parthian empire [15–16](#)

Passage to India, A 108–9
Peoples of the Book *see dhimmis*
perennial philosophy 159–63
Persia 22, 34, 38, 39, 49, 54, 55, 60, 77, 78, 82, 84
Philippines 67, 70, 76
philosophical zombie 205, 206
Plato 20, 48, 87, 147, 171, 185
Pliny the Elder 17
political liberalism 163–5
Portugal 60, 64, 67, 69–70, 76, 112, 113, 114
postmaterialist values 198
poverty (global) 13, 122, 125, 155, 187, 188, 190, 191, 192, 194, 195, 199
Powell, Enoch 115, 116, 174
primitive societies 29–30, 141
Princeton University 11, 139
Protestant Reformation 106
Puccetti, Roland 203, 204

Qin dynasty 26, 129
Qing dynasty 38, 89, 92–3
Qinghua University 127, 129
Qur’ān 49, 50, 52, 87, 155
Quṭb, Sayyid 133–4

Rabban Sawma 82–3, 177
racism 37–8, 39, 70–1, 109–11, 113–15, 116, 130–3, 145, 176
Ramaḍān, Tāriq 157
Rashīd al-Dīn 80
Rawls, John 163–4
Rāzī, Muḥammad ibn Zakariyā 87
Reconquest of Spain 48, 62–4, 68
relativism 110, 140, 141
religious pluralism (contemporary) 154–5
Renan, Ernest 170
republicanism 18, 19, 21–2, 170
Requerimiento 69
Rhodes, Cecil 104, 108
Ricci, Matteo viii, 89–94, 98–9, 101, 103, 139–40, 187, 205
Rites Controversy 93–4, 99, 128
Roman empire: as civilisation 17–23, 29–30, 42, 52–3; frontiers and contacts 15–17, 21, 38–41, 55; legacies 46–9, 61, 68, 89, 90, 91, 112, 113, 128, 147, 155, 160, 161, 166, 174; racial attitudes 39, 46
Russia 113, 118, 125, 152
Ruysbroeck, Willem van 81–2

Salafis [188](#), [189](#), [190](#), [191](#), [194](#)
Salafyo Costa [190–1](#), [194](#)
Salamanca, University of [68](#)
Salisbury, Lord [114](#)
Sanskrit [1](#), [28](#), [41](#), [42](#), [96](#), [97](#), [106](#)
Sarnath [2](#)
Savarkar, V D [133](#)
Schuon, Frithjof [159](#)
Scruton, Roger [171](#)
Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence [202](#)
second-order universalism [33](#), [36](#), [41](#), [42](#), [43](#), [45](#), [47–8](#), [49](#), [56–7](#), [59](#), [73](#), [74](#), [75](#), [83](#), [84](#), [100](#),
[201](#), [204](#)
Second Vatican Council [156](#)
Second World War [112](#), [114](#), [124](#)
secularisation thesis [153](#)
secularism [109](#), [114](#), [123](#), [134](#), [150](#), [153–4](#), [162](#), [163](#), [164](#), [166](#)
Senegal [113](#)
Sepoy Mutiny [108](#)
Sepúlveda, Juan Ginés de [71–2](#)
Shanghai [109](#), [130–1](#), [179](#)
Sheng Hong [128](#)
Siam [42](#)
Silk Road [15–18](#), [28](#), [55](#), [81](#)
Singapore [200](#)
Singh, Manmohan [118](#)
Slaughter, Anne-Marie [121](#)
slavery [21](#), [62](#), [71](#), [72](#)
Slezkine, Yuri [119–21](#)
Sloterdijk, Peter [3](#)
Smith, Anthony D [184](#)
social base of traditions [186–7](#)
social question *see* [poverty \(global\)](#)
Socrates [22](#)
Song dynasty [14](#), [35–6](#), [41](#), [56](#)
Sophists [10](#)
Sorokin, Pitirim [199–200](#), [206](#)
South Africa [155](#)
South America *see* [Latin America](#)
South Asia [17](#), [53](#), [59](#), [130](#), [131](#), [157](#), [158](#), [175](#), [178](#), [200](#); *see also* [India](#)
southeast Asia: as Chinese periphery [37](#), [65](#); as Indian periphery [42](#); as Muslim periphery
[59–60](#)
Soviet Union [124](#), [132](#)
Spain (mediæval) [10](#), [48](#), [62–8](#)
Sri Lanka [65](#)
Stanford University [147](#)

stationary state 197–201
Stoics 22, 78, 90
Sudan 158
sudra see caste system
Sui dynasty 53
Swiss minaret referendum 173, 175, 176, 177, 180
syncretism 94, 96, 159, 160, 185
Syriza 123

Tacitus 39–40, 72
Tagore, Rabindranath 114, 115
Tahrir Square 182, 189, 190
Taizong (emperor) 35
Tang dynasty 1, 35, 36, 37, 53–4, 55, 56, 131
Tarim Basin 15, 25, 34–5
Tenochtitlán 68, 69, 76
Themistius 46
third-order universalism 59, 73, 75, 79, 85, 87, 88, 90, 98, 101, 105, 141, 201, 204
Thomism see Aquinas
Tianxia (world-under-Heaven) 26, 127–9
Todorov, Tzvetan 72–4
tolerance 5, 6, 7–8, 10, 12, 29, 46, 51–2, 55, 56, 62, 63, 65, 72–3, 92, 95, 98, 106, 128–9, 133, 137, 138–9, 140, 141, 149, 154, 155, 157, 158, 160, 178, 191, 194
Toynbee, Arnold J 12, 17, 29–30, 49, 124–5, 148, 201
Traditionalist International 195
traditions, holistic encounter versus dialogue of correspondences 150
Trajan 38–9
transgovernmentalism 121
transnational competence 193
transnationality and transmigrants 172
tribute system 34, 35, 36, 37, 42, 60, 65
Troy 21
truth, conceptions of 3, 5, 6, 7, 12, 23, 30, 33, 42, 45, 56, 59, 73–4, 78, 85, 87, 103, 106, 134, 137–8, 139, 140, 141–2, 146–7, 148, 149, 150, 153, 155, 156, 164, 165, 171, 195
Tunisia 63, 188
Turkey 124, 163, 189
Turmeda, Anselm 63

‘*ulamā*’ 49, 95, 97
Umayyad dynasty 49, 62
United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) 123, 169
United Nations 119, 122, 143, 190
United States of America 113, 124, 129, 139, 145, 153, 163, 169, 176, 178, 186, 193, 194
universal jurisdiction 122
University College London 114

Valladolid debates 71–2
Vancouver 172
Vargas Llosa, Mario 5
Vedas 28–9, 30
Victoria (queen) 108
virtues 9, 19–22, 23–5, 26, 27–8, 29, 39, 40–1, 42, 46, 48, 59, 64, 65, 71, 72, 87, 90–1, 98–9, 106, 147, 150, 162, 163, 165, 174, 177, 205

Walzer, Michael 143, 171, 195
Wang Daiyu 56
Wang Fuzhi 38
Wang Yuankang 127
Warring States period 23, 25, 128
Washington, Robert E 130
Weber, Max 195
wenhua (cultural socialisation) 37
Whitehead, Alfred North 147
Wilkinson, David 201
Williams, Bernard 7
world civilisation, as future project 184–5, 193–5
World Parliament of Religions 159
World Social Forum 187, 192, 193
world state 22, 26, 48, 76–7, 78, 79, 87, 116, 195, 201
world-systems theory 122
World Trade Organisation 121
Wu (emperor) 26, 34, 35

Xiongnu 15, 34, 35
Xuanzang xvi, 1–2, 54, 177
Xunzi 23, 24, 25, 36

Yahbh-Allāhā III 82, 177
Yan Xuetong 129–30
Yang Tingyun 90, 91, 98, 103
Ye Xianggao 90
Yearley, Lee H 52–3, 150
Yemen 188
Yongle (emperor) 64
Yongzheng (emperor) 93
Yu Huan 17
Yuan dynasty *see* Mongol empire

Zhang Qian 34
Zhang Xie 67
Zhao Tingyang 127–8

Zheng He [64–5](#), [68](#)

Zhou dynasty [25](#), [128](#)

Zoroastrianism [49](#), [50](#), [54](#), [79](#), [96](#), [114](#)



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