

**Debates on Civilization in the Muslim World:  
Critical Perspectives on Islam and Modernity**

*Lutfi Sunar, ed.*

*New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017. 434 pages.*

“Civilization,” which plays a significant role in today’s world, is a term that has been discussed and debated through the ages and remains so today. In the broader context, and at different levels and contexts (e.g., historical, cultural, and political), it is used to describe “the entirety of collective

human values”; “consequential behavior against barbarism” (or simply “the idea of being civilized”); as a “vision of existence and order”; and, above all, as “being an abstraction of modernity and secularism.” One of the most oft-debated concepts in the social sciences, it has largely been framed by Western assumptions and concerns; although there are non-Western perspectives on it as well. A recent addition to the multi-faceted debate on civilization and modernization vis-à-vis the Muslim world is editor Lutfi Sunar’s *Debates on Civilization in the Muslim World*. Sunar is a Turkish sociologist who teaches at Istanbul University.

This collective endeavor of (predominantly young) Muslim scholars seeks to evaluate Muslim views on civilization by challenging the “embedded prejudices within the social theory” and offering “alternative viewpoints” (p. vii). It presents “a complex assessment of key ideas in the modernist discourse from non-ethnocentric perspectives and offers a new understanding of civilization” (p. viii).

To achieve this objective, the book has been divided into three main parts. Part 1, “Defining and Discussing Civilization,” consists of three chapters, by Anthony Pagden, Lutfi Sunar, and Mustafa Demirci, respectively, that review, analyze, and discuss definitions of civilization and modernity and their “Eurocentric” understandings. Part 2, “Debates on the Civilization in the Contemporary Muslim World,” examines non-Western civilizations, efforts to resist against being assimilated in Western perspectives and dominance. These chapters are contributed by Vahdettin Isik, Cemil Aydin, Necmettin Dogan, Halil Ibrahim Yenigun, Seyed Javad Miri, Mahmud Hakki Akin, and Driss Habti, respectively. Part 3, “Modernization, Globalization, and the Future of Civilization Debate,” features chapters by Syed Farid Alatas, Yunus Kaya, Murat Cemrek, and Khosrow Bagheri Noaparast, respectively. The volume’s overall theme is designed “to expose complex issues for further discussion pertaining to modernization, globalization, (de)colonization, and multiculturalism” (p. vii). As it is difficult to focus on all the chapters, I provide a brief assessment of some selected ones below.

In the Introduction, “Debates on Civilization, Islam, and Modernity: Some Critical Perspectives on the Current Agenda” (pp. 1-25), Sunar presents deep insights into the terms and issues of civilization, Islamic civilization, civilization in the Muslim world, and the future of civilization in the non-Western world, as well as contextualizes the various chapters within the broader perspective. His main emphasis here is that today, the “debates around civilization have evolved from an ontological to epistemological,

and even a political, position,” thus reinforcing “the need to define the idea of civilization and its future prospects” (p. 2).

In chapter 3, “The Question of Ages in Islamic Civilization” (pp. 79-114), Mustafa Demirici (Selcuk University, Turkey) states that each civilization has its own developmental phases, historical periods, rhythms, and types “depending on their internal dynamics and the interactions they have faced” (p. 85). Thus, he realizes and proposes “the need for a special periodization of the history and civilization of Islam” (p. 85). These four phases of Islamic history (pp. 92-111) have been proposed on the basis of a periodization and “holistic perspective” of Islamic history “not only on the basis of political developments, but also takes cultural, intellectual, and social factors into consideration” (p. 112). They are “The Age of Conquests and Formation (610-750),” “The Classical Age of Islam (750-1258),” “The Zenith of the Material Power of Islam and the Age of Empires (1258-1800),” and “Colonization by the West and the Age of Depression (1800-...)”

In chapter 4, “The Vision of Order and Al-‘Umran as an Explanatory Concept in the Debates on Civilization” (pp. 119-43), Vahdettin Isik (Fatih Sultan Mehmet Waqf University, Turkey) contributes to the critique of the modern understanding of civilization by showing the possibility of an alternative non-reductive system of thought. His support for this comes from Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddimah* and his concept of *‘umrān* as a “social system,” which he employs to understand the concept of civilization. Isik’s main goal is “to demonstrate the possibility of the existence of a social system other than the one that imposes a singular way of life defined by the modern West” (p. 119). He thus emphasizes that unlike *‘umrān*, the concept of civilization has been “immersed in discussions of progress and modernization,” and therefore concludes that “social life is a phenomenon which is constructed through the human agency and which can manifest itself in different forms under different circumstances” (p. 140).

In chapter 7, “The Rise and Demise of Civilizational Thinking in Contemporary Muslim Political Thought” (pp. 195-225), Halil Ibrahim Yenigun (Fellow of Europe in Middle East—Middle East in Europe, Berlin) puts forth the view that the attitude of Muslim thinkers (ranging from fundamentalists to liberals) toward the concept of civilization, which is another borrowed term like *nation*, *democracy*, *liberty*, and others, has remained “unique” for having not fluctuated (p. 196). Arguing that civilization is one of the “modern political concepts” that has gained “a degree of near-consensus among Muslim political thinkers” (p. 195), he attempts to “trace civilization’s trajectory throughout the cotemporary era, beginning with

Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi (1801-1873) up to and including Hamid Dabashi." Using comparative political theory, he concentrates on the "rise and demise of this concept" with this concept's "descriptive and normative value" (pp. 196-97).

Yenigun maintains that "the term *civilization* has possessed a primarily rhetorical value" and has functioned as a tool "to perpetuate colonial domination" (p. 197). Focusing a great deal on the thought and views of Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Sayyid Qutb, Ali Shariati, Ismet Ozel, and Hamid Dabashi, he concludes that "'Islamic Civilization' itself seems to be nothing more than a just defensive discourse constructed by Muslim apologists to counteract the project of the 'West,' which constructed 'the Orient' to serve as its distinct and inferior 'other'" (p. 218).

In chapter 12, "Civilizations in an Era of Globalization" (pp. 350-69), Yunus Kaya (Istanbul University) focuses on bridging the gaps between the debates on civilization and globalization, which came to the forefront through Samuel Huntington's seminal *Clash of Civilizations* (1996) and "the period following the collapse of the communist bloc" respectively. It also discusses the "impact of the globalization on cultures and identities around the world" (p. 351).

Besides these, the remaining chapters also provide fruitful discussions on various aspects of the civilization and modernization vis-à-vis Muslim world debate, ranging from "The Idea of Civilization in 18th century Social Theory," "Rethinking Civilization and Its Others," and "Beyond Civilization: Pan-Islamism and Pan-Asianism" to discussions on various contours of the "Islam-civilization-modernity" alliance by focusing on the contributions and revisiting the legacies of Ali Shariati on "Society and Religion," Alija Izetbegovic on "Culture and Civilization," and Hasan Hanafi and Abdallah Laroui on "Islam, Tradition, and Modernity." It also focuses, in a broader context, on various rubrics of "Modernization, Globalization, and the Future of the Civilization Debate" through a fathomable exploration by such prominent voices like Syed Farid Alatas on "Modernization and Development," Yunus Kaya on "Civilization, Globalization, and the Clash of Civilizations Debate," Murat Cemrek on "Conceptualizing Civilization between Othering and Multiculturalism," and Khosrow Bagheri Noaparast on "Civilizations and Intercultural Relations" in an "epistemological" perspective, respectively.

Keeping in view the extensiveness and diversity of topics, *Debates on Civilization in the Muslim World* is a significant contribution to evaluating the views of (predominantly young) Muslim scholars on the con-

cept of civilization in Islam and the Muslim world, as well as its relation with modernization, globalization, and other inter-related issues. It indeed lives up to and fairly substantiates its stated objective: to “expose complex issues for further discussion pertaining to modernization, globalization, (de) colonization, and multiculturalism” vis-à-vis Islam and the Muslim world. It will prove helpful to students and scholars of wide range of disciplines, ranging from Islamic studies to anthropology and civilizational studies.

Tauseef Ahmad Parray  
Assistant Professor, Islamic Studies, Higher Education Department  
Jammu & Kashmir, India