The State of the West: Are We at a Civilizational Moment?

by Christopher Garbowski (November 2024)

Astronomer Copernicus, or Conversations with God (Jan Matejko, 1871–73)

In his *Spiked* essay "Why the West must fight for its History," Frank Furedi forcefully claims: "At times, supporters of the culture war against Western civilisation behave as if its legacy is a menace to the contemporary world." Thus, he passionately argues—the essay introduces his recent book *The War Against the Past*— "unless we retrieve our historical memory, we are doomed to a state of cultural paralysis." His line of analysis concerns one of the factors that indicate the

West is undergoing what could be termed a civilizational moment, which, after some looks at what forms the civilization in both a positive and negative sense, will be the main focus of this essay.

Returning to the problem Furedi brings up, part of the often-neglected richness of the West's historical memory he rightfully bemoans is its diversity, in the best sense of the word. This is caused by its being captured in various manners, but perhaps most evocatively by national communities. Apart from the specificity of this memory, which often aids the given community in difficult times, there are moments when a national community manages to capture an essence of the West. One such work capturing a moment of the national community's historical memory that included a significant contribution to Western civilization is Polish painter Jan Matejko's nineteenth century painting *Astronomer Copernicus, or Conversations with God*, in which the eponymous astronomer looks up into the night sky with obvious inspiration, as if about to experience a religious epiphany. This naturally includes an element of artistic interpretation, but the painter was certainly onto something.

Matejko was a master of historical painting—a veritable Steven Spielberg of the grand canvas—that spoke to a broader Polish public at a time when the national community did not have its own state, which had been partitioned in the previous century and sovereignty was to be regained after WWI. The attraction of Copernicus was obvious, with his monumental influence on world astronomy, thus in a symbolic sense he brought both the Middle Ages to their zenith, and introduced the Renaissance which would carry on with the scientific revolution on its own terms. But Copernicus became a mathematical astronomer through the medieval institution that laid a foundation for that revolution: the university. This was an institution that at the time united faith and reason, which Matejko seems to have intuited Copernicus personified. Formally, he was a secular

canon of the Catholic church at Thorn, within an autonomous Prussian region of the Kingdom of Poland, where he returned to from two universities: the Polish Jagiellonian University in Krakow, which was a key to his formation, and subsequently of Padua, the leading university of Europe.

Alfred Whitehead, co-author with Bertrand Russell of *Principia Mathematica*, recognized that Christian theology was a key to the rise of science. He reflected upon what inspired this:

It must come from the medieval insistence on the rationality of God, conceived as with the personal energy of Jehovah and with the rationality of a Greek philosopher. Every detail was supervised and ordered: the search into nature could only result from the vindication of the faith in rationality.

Yet for all its undoubted benefits, the rise of science also contributed to a grave difficulty, not restricted to the West. Alongside its morally positive or neutral results, to no small degree it gave rise to the power of the civilization. And power enables but it can and often does corrupt. This was stressed by Lord Acton in the nineteenth century. That power from science was conveyed through the technology it gave rise to, and the negative effects could come virtually at once. In one lifetime Alfred Nobel suffered greatly from the abuse that his invention of dynamite gave rise to, and thus famously one of the prizes he initiated to somehow make up for this was the peace prize.

Many of the abuses of the technology toward the civilizations Westerners encountered at various stages arose in part from the disproportionate advantages it gave them. In the New World, for instance, the indigenous peoples—apart from the Mayans and Incans—were largely still in the Stone Age, while the Europeans had steel and guns. They weren’t necessarily evil, but neither were they saints: and the advantages of this power were too great not to tempt them and often enough they did not resist. However, some point out that the colonialism

this gave rise to wasn't just a Western trait. In the accompanying slave trade Thomas Sowell points out more Africans died crossing the Sahara to the Middle East than the Atlantic; moreover, the states of the West—primarily under the guidance of the British—were the first to abandon the atrocious trade.

What are some of the political and ethical sources of Western thought that lead to this mixed result, with evil on the one side and attempts to deal with it on the other? In other words, where does this political conscience reside, and why does it work in such different directions. Indirectly Sowell provides some interesting thoughts. In his book of 1987 *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles* he probes the role of visions underpinning political ideologies. Sowell argues social visions act as a kind of cognitive road map that guide everyone, since no mind can encompass social reality in its full dynamism and complexity: more basically, a vision "is what we sense or feel *before* we have constructed any systematic reasoning that could be called a theory, much less deduced any specific consequences as hypotheses to be tested against evidence." Crucially, when political leaders tap into broader social visions they are able to create an agenda for both thought and action. Sowell focuses on two such broader contrasting visions that have inspired politicians and influenced societies for the last centuries, what he terms the constrained vision and unconstrained vision of human nature. The constrained vision sees human nature as flawed and has a tragic bent, while the unconstrained vision is a moral vision that focuses on human intentions and ideals. At times this latter is evidenced in a disconcerting fashion where the ends seem to justify the means of attaining them, as in one of the primary historical exemplifications of this vision, the French Revolution, which gave "the power of life and death, to those who spoke in the name of 'the people.'" In contrast, the American Revolution, largely illustrative of the constrained vision, ended with a

constitution that implements a system of checks and balances. As the authors of the Federalist Papers that Sowell quotes put it: “It may be a reflection on human nature that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature.”

In the context of a study on European political anthropology the ethical results of these visions are applied further. In *The European Dispute Concerning Human Nature*—only available in Polish—a major goal of Michał Gierycz, a political scientist from Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University of Warsaw, draws heavily upon Sowell’s distinctions of the constrained vision and unconstrained vision of human nature, stressing their basic anthropological character and developing them further for his specific analysis plumbing the understanding of human nature in current European politics at the EU level, as well as at the level of its member states.

In his explication of a constrained anthropology, Gierycz concentrates on its underlying theological assumptions. In this political vision of Sowell Gierycz detects an implicit assumption of the doctrine of the original sin through an awareness of the inherently flawed side of human nature. Yet although human nature has its limitations, he argues, taking this fact into account allows for organizing social matters in a more realistic and stable manner than would otherwise be possible. From a historical perspective the author points out that even in Greek philosophy a constrained vision of the human being was present in the concept of natural law, which implied certain limits. Later the Christian conception of innate human dignity was instrumental in breaking down class, social and gender barriers. From this perspective even the state has its limitations. Gierycz probes the theological underpinnings of Sowell’s stress on the checks and balances necessary for the state, eloquently captured in James Madison’s famous statement: “If men were angels, no government

would be necessary."

Gierycz begins his version of the unconstrained anthropology from an analysis of the initial impact of Rousseau on the current. In the French thinker's stress on the importance of seeking the natural man the author detects a secularized version of paradise. Ultimately, he laid the foundations for a Manichean view of the world and an elitist perspective. In his analysis Gierycz follows French political philosopher Chantal Dessol's line of thinking where she argues that discarding the idea of the original sin in the sense of evil rooted in our nature had two consequences: the hope of eliminating evil and the necessity of locating its cause. Consequently, the certainty that evil can be removed from the world leads to the question of the means by which earthly salvation can be brought about. A tempting solution depends on locating evil in certain groups, visible and detectable, and bringing about their elimination. Gierycz points out that at the foundation of an unconstrained anthropology is not so much the premise of the perfectibility of human nature as its fluidity. Whereas the constrained anthropology with its holistic vision of human nature unequivocally stresses the dignity of the human being, the unconstrained anthropology with its relativism does so in an unsubstantive manner, i.e. "as an imperative of practical reason or as an axiom. Usually it explicitly or implicitly subverts dignity."

The two visions in their current state in late modernity are summarized along the following lines. Constrained anthropology is strong in both theoretical and normative perspectives. By presenting a holistic anthropology it creates a broad space for human freedom yet with clearly defined boundaries of the good. In contrast, an unconstrained anthropology in late modernity undermines any constant aspects of human nature, which deprives the human of any teleological aspect to her or his existence. One can add this lack of teleology—transcendent or otherwise—has a nihilistic tendency with many iterations.

The political implementation of these ethically contrasting perspectives can largely be found in the European Union, and its member national communities. With the current consequence, one might add, that the EU with its unconstrained vision of the new Europe, strives to ever more consequently undermine the sovereignty of the member states, that are largely based on a constrained vision.

British social commentator and co-host of free speech podcast TRIGGERnometry Konstantin Kisin similarly looks to Sowell to explain the reaction of some liberals and even progressives to recent events. In his article "The Day Delusions Died" in *The Free Press* October 1, 2024 he observes: "Hamas's barbarism—and the explanations and celebrations throughout the West that followed their orgy of violence—have forced an overnight exodus from the 'unconstrained camp' into the 'constrained' one." Among the issues progressives pandered to was open borders for migrants. Kisin retorts that it's finally obvious borders "aren't about bigotry, they're about security." He poignantly worries that if Western civilization with all its accomplishments is allowed of go under, "it will not be replaced by a progressive utopia. It will be replaced by chaos and barbarism."

He calls for the West to face up to the truth, something Sowell has always insisted upon, even if that truth is unpleasant. He concludes:

And the truth is we have indulged in magical thinking for too long, choosing comforting myths over harsh realities. About terrorism. About immigration. And about a host of other issues. In our hunger for progress, we have forgotten that not all change is for the better. Now the world is paying the price for that self-indulgence. Let's hope recent events are the wake-up call we so desperately need.

It is evident Kisin believes we are at a civilizational moment. One occasion he had to voice his concern to a more

distinguished public was during his speech at the opening of the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship (ARC) conference in October 2003. A standup comic at one point in his life, he deftly mixed the comic with the serious. More than once he said: “We are in the fight of our lives.” Among others he boldly claimed: “There are some people whose brains have been broken. To them our past is abominable and our future is one of managed decline. My message is simple. How Dare You!? You will not steal my son’s future with empty words.”

Os Guinness was a participant of the conference who had much to say about the West’s civilizational moment. An author and social critic, he has been a Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution, and was the lead drafter of The Global Charter of Freedom of Conscience and Religion. And if his name rings a bell, yes, he is a descent of the family that gave their name to a popular brand of beer they established a couple of centuries ago. Guinness participated the ARC panel entitled “What is the West?” The panel was moderated by Jordan Peterson and among the participants was Ayaan Hirsi Ali, shortly after her conversion to Christianity.

Besides his rich contribution to the lively debate, Guinness contributed a research paper to ARC—available online—actually entitled “Our Civilizational Moment.” In a condensed fashion within it he outlines the rise of the West, its contribution to humanity, and its decline primarily from the twentieth century until now, when he argues the civilization is virtually on the edge of a precipice. The threats are both external and internal, the latter far more serious. Nevertheless he stresses, despite the West being on the wane: “Human freedom and responsibility, human choices and their consequences are much more than cycles, the swings of a pendulum, and they are never fated or purely determined.” Consequently, “Renewal is as possible as decline, though highly demanding because of what it requires, and due to the major obstacles that must be overcome to answer the deepest

hopes of humanity in the global era."

Among other things, adequate time must be taken to consider an appropriate response. The questions of our time run deep, insists Guinness, among them: "What (. . .) is the vision of life that should inspire us, the master story of history that should shape us, and the ground of foundational trust that is our confidence—the 'we' behind the word 'us' being nations and civilizations as well as individuals?" He concludes this line of questioning warning that "without a profound, rational, and responsible faith, there can only be faltering and civilizational decline."

Guinness continues by presenting the rise and decline of the West, focusing more on Europe in the case of the latter, yet concluding with the disease that is currently affecting the lead nation, the United States. "Today, the chorus of decline and assault includes the United States in its scope," he argues, since "America is torn by its greatest internal division since the Civil War, instigated by radical ideas adopted uncritically from Europe." Among these, cultural Marxism has virtually marched through the institutions, as its proponents intended. Thus, "Americans must enlarge their horizons, stretch the borders of their thinking, and venture beyond the comfort of their customary histories. (. . .) In short, no one can understand and resolve America's present crisis without understanding its source and connection to the wider crisis of the West."

Upon claiming outright that the West is in a civilizational moment, Guinness provides a concise explanation of what such a juncture entails: namely, "a critical transition in the life of a civilization, when it loses the decisive connection with the dynamic that inspired it." At that point, there are three options that necessarily follow: either the civilization undergoes a renewal of that specific initial dynamic, the replacement of the dynamic with another, or the decline of the civilization. Thus, he concludes, "the issue for a

civilization in a civilizational moment is its vision of ultimate reality—is the civilization in living touch with the ideas, ideals, and inspiration that created it, and which it needs to continue to flourish? Or, with its roots severed and no replacement in place, will it decline and die?" In the case of the West, on account of globalization the result of the current civilizational moment has consequences not only for itself, but for humanity and future generations, he insists.

Since ideally the West should undergo a renewal, Guinness discusses at length what he feels is the initial specific dynamic of the civilization that he feels must be regained. "There is no question that the Christian faith was the *ultimate allegiance* and the view of *ultimate reality* that most Westerners knew through history," he proclaims. Moreover, "There is no alternative to an open acknowledgement of the powerful role of faith in the rise of the West, in the purported decline of the West, and in suggestions about the potential renewal of the West." Thus the implicit denial or even "cancellation" of this factor is one of the major obstacles to the renewal of the civilization. Why this impedes moving forward stems from the seriousness of the challenges that must be dealt with at present: "Considering the gravity of the global challenges facing humanity, to take them seriously is to be braced to face up to the question of ultimate reality. At such a moment, anything less will always turn out to be trivial and inadequate." After presenting more specifics on the broad denial and what politics misses out on account of this, he concludes:

The West is now largely opposed to the faith that made it, and the intelligentsia in its lead society, America, are increasingly opposed to both the faith and revolution that made it. These facts cannot but be consequential. For those with eyes to see, the present civilizational moment is history's wake-up call to the West. Ignore it and the decline will be irreversible.

Guinness makes it clear that in the renewal of the West which he argues must include the renewal of the Jewish and Christian contributions, he is not in favor of a post-liberal return to any notion of neo-Christendom or any of the other historical alternatives, that in themselves could possibly become authoritarian. He gives the current example of Putin's alleged forwarding of "Christian values" along with Patriarch Kirill's—arguably blasphemous, I might add—support of Putin's war. There are autocrats on both the right and the left. Moreover, globalism is a fact but it must be rethought. "Globalists and Global Resetters go wrong from the start by beginning with problems, not principles," he argues. Moreover, the idea of global governance inevitably would lead to a revived imperialism, along the lines of a Fuhrer. "After all," he pointedly notes, "The real evil of Hitler's 'nationalism' was his refusal to remain a nation." In other words, fascism is often thought of as rampant nationalism, but it is actually rather a first step to imperialism: here Guinness is in line with Yoram Hazony's use of the same example with a similar conclusion for his support of genuine nationalism. And so, in opposition to ideological globalism "it is time to buck the disdain for nations and nationalism," he argues, since "[o]ften, only a nation can be the guardian of a shared faith, language, culture, law, tradition, and defense that are precious for a people." In response to the civilizational moment, the West should affirm two "key values": human freedom and sovereignty. "Sovereignty is an important bulwark against overly centralized power that can act against human freedom and national interests." Thus the West should start with first principles based on these values, alongside the crucial importance of faith, to work out model solutions to national and global problems. This will require a directed project of serious debate on the best way forward for the world: "And it is time to strive with heart and soul for a more free, just, and hopeful human future."

Guinness is aware such a project will not be easy. But it

seems there is a growing number of talented people who are turning away from the self-destructive ways of much of the Western elite, and believe something must be done. An interesting case is that of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who went through two conversions to become a Christian, which she documents and explains in her essay “Why I am now a Christian,” published in *UnHerd* magazine shortly after her participation in the ARC debate. Initially she was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kenya. Disillusioned, she came to the West, initially to Holland, and maintained a low level of Islamic faith, but was shocked by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack. She made her final cut with her old faith when she read Bertrand Russell’s lecture from 1927 entitled “Why I am Not a Christian.” Thus she informally joined that caste among the Western elites of the time, the New Atheists, becoming friends with the circle of Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins. What was missing in the long run for Hirsi Ali was the answer to the question of what unites people in the West. “I came to realize that Russell and my atheist friends failed to see the wood for the trees. The wood is the civilization built on the Judeo-Christian tradition; it is the story of the West, warts and all. Russell’s critique of the contradictions in Christian doctrine is serious, but it is too narrow in scope.” She points out it is also the strength of the West that made it possible for him to write such a book, adding the poignant question of whether a Muslim could stand before an audience in a Muslim country “and deliver a lecture with the title ‘Why I am Not a Muslim’? In fact, a book with that title exists, written by an ex-Muslim. But the author published it in America under the pseudonym Ibn Warraq. It would have been too dangerous otherwise.”

In her view of the current state of the West has raised the statement made by G.K. Chesterton to the level of a prophesy: “When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing, they then become capable of believing in anything.” And so, reflecting to no small extent on what has

been her life experience, she expresses what is before us in the West as follows:

In this nihilistic vacuum, the challenge before us becomes civilisational. We can't withstand China, Russia and Iran if we can't explain to our populations why it matters that we do. We can't fight woke ideology if we can't defend the civilisation that it is determined to destroy. And we can't counter Islamism with purely secular tools. To win the hearts and minds of Muslims here in the West, we have to offer them something more than videos on TikTok.

Worth pointing out Ayaan Hirsi Ali's husband is historian Niall Ferguson, co-founder of the University of Austin, thus engaged with combating the ideological turn of so many universities in the West, in which surveys indicate a majority of students do not feel free to speak their minds. Although all this is not much at the moment considering the challenges involved, with any significant increase of such talented and insightful people along with associations such as Alliance for Responsible Citizenship perhaps there would be a chance of somehow moving in the right direction to eventually overcome this arguably civilizational moment. And as Guinness points out: more than the West depends on it.

Table of Contents

Christopher Garbowski is Professor Emeritus at Maria Curie-Sklodowska University, Poland. He is the author or co-editor of several books, among them is *Religious Life in Poland: History, Diversity and Modern Issues*, from 2014. His most recent book is *The Problem of Moral Rearmament: Poland, the European Union, and the War in Ukraine*, published in 2024.

Follow NER on Twitter @NERIconoclast