

ISLAM
KNOWLEDGE AND CIVILIZATION

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CHAPTER FIVE

WESTERN CIVILISATION: ITS ORIGIN, BASIS AND FEATURES

Munawar Haque

Meaning of Civilisation

The idea of civilisation was developed by eighteenth-century French thinkers as the opposite of the concept of “barbarism.” Civilised society differed from primitive society because it was settled, urban and literate. To be civilised was good, to be uncivilised was bad. The concept of civilisation provided a standard by which to judge societies, and during the nineteenth century, Europeans devoted much intellectual, diplomatic, and political energy to elaborating the criteria by which non-European societies might be judged sufficiently “civilised” to be accepted as members of the European-dominated international system.¹

All civilisations share some basic characteristics. The most important of these similarities is the presence of cities. The word civilisation itself comes from the Latin word *civilis* (meaning “civic”), which is also the root of citizen and *civil*.² In simple terms, we may understand civilisation to mean:

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 41-42.

² M. E. Weisner, J. R. Ruff, and W. B. Wheeler, *Discovering the Western Past: A Look at the Evidence* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), p. 1.