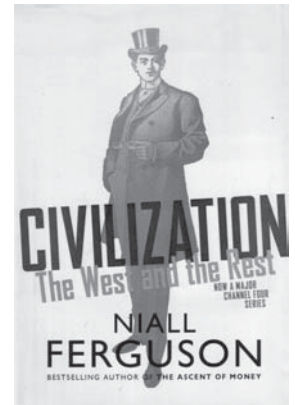


Civilization: the West and the Rest

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by Niall Ferguson



■ reviewed by Peter Warburton

Niall Ferguson has set some daunting tasks for himself over the past decade and has scored some stunning successes in *The Ascent of Money* and *The Cash Nexus*, for example. He has dared to defend aspects of Western imperialism in *Empire: How Britain made the modern world* and *Colossus: the rise and fall of the American empire*. To his immense credit, he has rescued economic and political history from captivity in ivory towers and served it up to a mass audience. He has asserted the relevance of history and precedent, not least in respect of financial greed, common stupidity and economic crisis. In *Civilization*, he extends the thesis to insist that there is much that is good about Western civilization and that its greatest threat lies not from its Eastern rivals but from the abandonment of its core principles by an ill-educated and angst-ridden generation.

Civilization has a contrived structure, owing to its parallel expression as a six-part television series for Channel 4. Ferguson argues that the West bested the Rest due to six 'killer applications' or 'apps' as we must now call them. One might wonder why six, rather than five or seven? These were: competition, in that the political and corporate

fragmentation of Europe and its constituent countries was conducive to contest; the scientific revolution, in that Western Europe dominated the 17th century breakthroughs in mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry and biology; the rule of law and representative government, in that 'an optimal system of social and political order emerged in the English-speaking world, based on private property rights and the representation of property-owners in elected legislatures'; modern medicine, in that most advances in the 19th and early 20th centuries were attributable to North Americans and Western Europeans; the consumer society, in the diffusion of affordable goods due to efficient mass production; and the work ethic, in that Westerners not only worked hard and worked well, but saved for a better future.

One reason you are reading a review of *Civilization* here is that Ferguson makes much of the contribution of Protestantism to the good bits of Western civilization. He argues that 'the story of our time ... is that the Rest finally began to download' Western apps, beginning with the Japanese in the 1860s. He quotes a Chinese academic scholar, who acknowledges that, rather than military might or a superior political or economic system, Western pre-eminence rested upon the Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life which 'made



►► possible the emergence of capitalism and the successful transition to democratic politics'. Ferguson asserts that the flattering imitation of the West in the East is an ongoing demonstration of the power of these killer apps. He notes that Christianity's free formats are enjoying prodigious growth in the East, not least in the unregistered churches flourishing in China's most openly capitalistic cities.

Ferguson's examination of Weber's concept of the Protestant work ethic is cursory and unexceptional. His conclusion is that the Protestant emphasis on education, especially literacy, was its decisive contribution: the Protestant word ethic, as he calls it. Biblical theology has much more to teach about the triumph of Western civilization than Ferguson admits. Surely, it is the value of each individual life – declared in the sacrifice of the Son of God – that marks out Christianity from all other religions. To the extent that Christian belief in the sanctity and potentiality of human life ensured that individuals enjoyed greater degrees of economic, political and religious freedom in the West, herein lay the great secret of its success. The fearful centralisation of power, authority and wealth that characterised almost every rival civilization between 1500 and 1913 deprived them of their greatest resource: the imagination, ingenuity, inventiveness and intuition of their diverse human populations. Ferguson argues that the West did a better job at identifying the rare individuals in the extreme right-tail of the distribution whose innate and acquired talents were instrumental in achieving scientific, medical and technological breakthroughs. Genius in repressed societies fared less well.

A biblical understanding of human value may have promoted individual freedoms in the West, but Westerners did a poor job of sharing that understanding on their travels. An unanswered question in *Civilization* is to what extent the colonists secured long-term advantage through pillage of the conquered lands for resources and slaves. The subjugation of native populations was all too

frequently based on the system of equivalent monetary values in Leviticus 27 rather than the sacrificial values of John 10. It took the selfless missionaries of the second half of the 19th century to restore Christian values in Western colonies and beyond. They communicated the grace of God in Jesus and used their influence to promote the benefits of medicine, education and equitable government and, ultimately, the abolition of slavery. Thanks to them, remarkably, an Englishman is still warmly received in a majority of former colonies, as confirmed by my recent visits to India, Sri Lanka and Singapore.

This is a bold book that dares even to counter the popular assumption that the future belongs to China. Ferguson reminds us that similar projections of inexorable ascent used to be made for Japan before 1990. Precisely because China's economic and political systems are not truly competitive, it could succumb like Japan to a real estate bust, financial collapse and economic stagnation. China might be riven asunder by economic inequality, provoking social unrest; a discontented rising middle class could overturn the existing political order or China may so antagonise its neighbours that they form alliances with America. However, the book ends with speculations about the West's demise.

Western art and music do not register in Ferguson's portrayal of civilization, which is a key omission. For him, civilization is best measured by the ability to make 'sustained improvement in the material quality of life' and in the West has 'patently enjoyed a real and sustained edge over the Rest for most of the past 500 years.' The book also takes some peculiar detours not least in the interminable chapter on medicine. A scathing critique by Pankaj Mishra in the *London Review of Books* accuses Ferguson of being a populist simplifier rather than a diligent scholar. This is a harsh verdict on a book that is packed with fascination, colour and provocative thinking. ■

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