

WHY THE
WEST
IS BEST



*A Muslim Apostate's
Defense of Liberal Democracy*

IBN WARRAQ

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PRAISE FOR WHY THE WEST IS BEST

In his new book, Ibn Warraq continues his courageous and brilliantly written evaluation of contemporary societies. He provides an eloquent, fervent, and much needed advocacy of Western principles and values, which he considers superior to those in any other societies, and challenges Western intellectuals who are unprepared or unwilling to defend those values.

—MICHAEL CURTIS, DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR
EMERITUS OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

A brilliant, uncompromising, and exceedingly powerful defense of the West's civilizational heritage by one of the bravest and most original public intellectuals writing today.

—EFRAIM KARSH, DIRECTOR, MIDDLE EAST FORUM

for Deborah

ACANTHUS (Greek: ακανθος, derived from ake, “point, thorn”) is a genus of about thirty species of flowering plants of the Acanthaceae family, found in temperate and tropical climates of the Mediterranean basin and Asia. It has been used as a decorative motif throughout the history of Western art: on Corinthian capitals of ancient Greek and Roman columns, in the ornate decorations of Byzantine architecture, on Romanesque buildings, in sculpted wood and stone of the Middle Ages, in the borders and ornamented initials of illuminated manuscripts, on sumptuous fabrics, in baroque and rococo styles, in Northern woodcarving and painting, on Italian ceramics, in the designs of William Morris. The acanthus has graced almost every form of visual art across millennia, from the Mediterranean to Scandinavia. Given this ubiquity and the centrality of our classical heritage, the acanthus is a fitting symbol of Western civilization.

“Acanthus” wallpaper, designed by William Morris, 1875. (The Stapleton Collection/Art Resource, NY)



Limbourg brothers (fl. 1399-1416), detail from the Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry. (Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY)



Acanthus-trimmed capitals on the cathedral in Syracuse, Italy, by Andrea Palma, completed in 1753. (Photo © Giovanni Dall'Orto, WikiCommons)



PREFACE

A story about Mahatma Gandhi has been circulating for years. After being given a tour of Great Britain, he was asked in Parliament what he thought of British civilization. Gandhi's answer: that it might be a good idea. The story is hard to trace to its source and may be apocryphal. Even so, that reply—revealing little wisdom and even less wisdom—aptly sums up Gandhi's ingratitude, hypocrisy, arrogance, and incomprehension.

Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence was effective with the British precisely because they were not inclined to use excessive force against unarmed civilians. Instead, they behaved in a civilized manner, and they left. Would Gandhi's tactics have worked with the Nazis? Moreover, the British departure from India was followed by violence, as Muslims slaughtered Hindus and vice versa. Nirad Chaudhuri, an Indian intellectual, always blamed Gandhi. "To me all these demands of Mahatma Gandhi [on the British government] seemed not only extreme, but even crude and irrational," Chaudhuri wrote. "It appeared to me that his entire ideology was driven by a resolve to abandon civilized life and revert to a primitive existence."¹

What of your own Indian civilization, Mr. Gandhi? The British banned one manifestation of it, the custom of suttee, where a widowed Hindu woman was forced to immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. The Portuguese and later the French and the Dutch also banned the practice in their own Indian colonies. Another shameful expression of Indian civilization, the iniquitous caste system, remains in force even today, depriving millions of their human rights even after sixty-five years of de jure prohibition.

What of your own racism, Mr. Gandhi? In a well-documented critique, G. B. Singh points out that during the Zulu Wars in South Africa, the Mahatma was urging Indians to show patriotism by killing blacks. "Gandhi is overly eager to see his Indians in a war against blacks," Singh writes. "After all, he tells them rather frankly, they too are colonists over blacks and therefore, standing shoulder to shoulder with fellow white colonists is a natural progression."²

And to what can we attribute the stark failures of India today? In 2007, the World Bank reported that 80 percent of India's 1.1 billion people survived on less than two dollars a day—which meant that more than one-third of the world's poor lived in India.³ Two years later, the World Health Organization estimated that "about 49 per cent of the world's underweight children, 34 per cent of the world's stunted children and 46 per cent of the world's wasted children" lived in India despite the impressive progress in the overall economy.⁴ The Global Hunger Index found "that 'serious' rates of hunger persisted across Indian states that have posted enviable rates of economic growth in recent years, including Maharashtra and Gujarat."⁵ India currently has the largest illiterate population of any nation on

earth. Racism and drug addiction are widespread and growing.⁶ One could even suggest that Indian civilization might be a good idea.

Gandhi's contemptuous dismissal of the British is refuted by the facts on both sides—of colonizer and colonized. On pulling up stakes, Britain left India with an elected parliamentary government that survives to this day, a sure indication that democracy was planted deeply in the political mind of India. The constitution formulated by Indians includes a bill of rights derived from the U.S. Constitution, even using some identical phrasing—an indirect British legacy. The British bequest included the rule of law. In fact, the entire legal system they had introduced over the years was left unaltered. It was constructed by Lord Macaulay, whose genius "gives life to modern India as we know it," according to the Indian historian K. M. Pannikar.⁷ India also inherited a British-style administrative machine, the incorruptible Indian Civil Service, to carry on the business of government in a vast country of disparate religions and languages.

The British left India with well-trained doctors, teachers, engineers, and craftsmen, and an infrastructure of railways, roads, bridges, and irrigation systems, along with distinguished Victorian architecture. The English language enables an Indian from the south whose native tongue is Tamil to communicate with someone from Delhi who speaks Hindi or Punjabi. A mastery of English is allowing India to take her place in the world economy today. There were also spiritual gifts: British and other European scholars gave back to India her own history and culture. With their insatiable intellectual curiosity, the British wrote about every aspect of life, literature, philosophy, religion, language, art and architecture in India. Their scholarship is still revered and taught to every Indian schoolchild. British civilization was, indeed, not only a great idea but a great blessing.

Much of what has been most valuable to the nations emerging from colonialism was bequeathed to them by the British and other European powers. Yet many Western academics, along with some Third World intellectuals, claim that the West has taken more from the world than it has contributed, and that its material success has come at the expense of others. Western leaders have been bullied into constantly apologizing for the West's sins. It is considered "Eurocentric" or racist to assert that the West is superior to other cultures; instead, we are encouraged to repeat that Western civilization is culturally, intellectually, and spiritually defective. But we know this is nonsense.

This essay argues that Western civilization is good for the world. I will sketch out a moral ideal by drawing a particular set of values from the history of the West—values that are both explicit and implicit in Western liberal democracies and enshrined in that magnificent document, the Constitution of the United States of America. We can trace these ideals back as far as the Bible and Greek antiquity. A fascist or a communist might also trace his own principles back through time to ancient Greece, perhaps to Sparta rather than Athens. My advocacy of a different branch of our Western heritage is neither arbitrary nor subjective, however. The political and social configurations of the West in the second decade of the twenty-first century indicate that we have reached a certain

measure of agreement on the principles that resulted in the stability and prosperity we have enjoyed since the end of the Second World War.

Among the most important of these principles are liberty and individual dignity. But our freedoms are often taken for granted; we seem to forget that we need to guard them lest they disappear without our noticing until it is too late. We may not realize how serious are the threats to our fundamental values, both from foreign enemies and from multicultural appeasement at home. As Andrew Jackson said, "Eternal vigilance by the people is the price of liberty."⁸ In this book, I suggest ways to be vigilant and offer some tools for defending Western civilization from the threats it faces.

* * *

Some readers may be puzzled to see a whole chapter devoted to New York City in a book about defining and defending Western civilization. In New York, I show the principles of the United States Constitution being applied in a real, vibrant place. I give the term "Western civilization" a physical context in the very concrete of the city. The details of New York's streets and structures create a believable, breathing image of Western civilization, just as Dickens created believable, breathing characters. See this building, I say—it's an example of beautiful architecture, one of the glories of New York, and as integral to Western civilization as the works of Shakespeare. See that building—it's the New York Public Library. Inside the Beaux Arts masterpiece is an institution that embodies key aspects of Western civilization: philanthropy, education, the love of knowledge, the preservation of all the best that has been written and published. Each time you admire the façade of the New York Public Library, you are paying homage to Western civilization. Each time you consult a book in the magnificent Main Reading Room, you are participating in the maintenance of Western civilization. By working and living in New York, you are breathing Western civilization, continuously reminded of its benefits and its values.

Describing a New York street that became known as Tin Pan Alley and the area known as Broadway led me into the Great American Songbook, created by composers and lyricists who were born and lived and worked in that great city. Discussions of Western civilization are too often confined to works of high art that reflect a relatively narrow element of public taste and experience. I maintain that Western popular culture at its best is worthy of respect and should be cherished as much as the operas of Wagner. The work of composers like George Gershwin, born and bred in New York, embodies Western ideals over and above the aesthetic principles of the music itself. I could have written at length about various artists associated with the metropolis—Fred Astaire, P. G. Wodehouse, George Kaufman, the Marx Brothers (born in the Yorkville section of the Upper East Side)—and their contributions to Western popular culture, with creations that are witty, graceful, inspired, and at times touched with genius.

Do you ever ask yourself, as you listen to Frank Sinatra singing "The Lady Is

Tramp," what made it possible? What principles or institutions should we thank
for it? This book is, in part, an effort to provide an answer.

* * *

I should like to thank, as ever, Fred Siegel for his wise counsel and his
encouragement of this endeavor; Irfan Khawaja and Austin Dacey, whose critical
spirit saved me from many errors; Hugh Fitzgerald, who picked up on many
grammatical solecisms and improved my style no end; and Phyllis Chesler, for her
friendship, kindness, and advice. None of them can be held accountable for the
opinions expressed here.

PROLOGUE

THE SUPERIORITY OF WESTERN VALUES IN EIGHT MINUTES

In a public debate with Tariq Ramadan in London on October 9, 2007, I was given eight minutes to argue for the superiority of Western values. This was my defense of the West:

The great ideas of the West—rationalism, self-criticism, the disinterested search for truth, the separation of church and state, the rule of law, equality before the law, freedom of conscience and expression, human rights, liberal democracy—altogether constitute quite an achievement, surely, for any civilization. This set of principles remains the best and perhaps the only means for all people, no matter what race or creed, to live in freedom and reach their full potential.¹ Western values—the basis of the West's self-evident economic, social, political, scientific and cultural success—are clearly superior to any other set of values devised by mankind. When Western values have been adopted by other societies, such as Japan or South Korea, their citizens have reaped benefits.

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness: this triptych succinctly defines the attractiveness and superiority of Western civilization. In the West we are free to think what we want, to read what we want, to practice our religion, to live as we choose. Liberty is codified in human rights, a magnificent Western creation but also, I believe, a universal good. Human rights transcend local or ethnocentric values, conferring equal dignity and value on all humanity regardless of sex, ethnicity, sexual preference, or religion. At the same time, it is in the West that human rights are most respected.

It is the West that has liberated women, racial minorities, religious minorities, and gays and lesbians, recognizing and defending their rights. The notions of freedom and human rights were present at the dawn of Western civilization, at least in ideals, but have gradually come to fruition through supreme acts of self-criticism. Because of its exceptional capacity for self-criticism, the West took the initiative in abolishing slavery; the calls for abolition did not resonate even in black Africa, where rival African tribes took black prisoners to be sold as slaves to the West.

Today, many non-Western cultures follow customs and practices that are clear violations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). In many countries, especially Islamic ones, you are not free to read what you want. Under sharia, or Islamic law, women are not free to marry whom they wish, and their rights of inheritance are circumscribed. Sharia, derived from the Koran and the practice and sayings of Muhammad, prescribes barbaric punishments such as

stoning to death for adultery. It calls for homosexuals and apostates to be executed. In Saudi Arabia, among other countries, Muslims are not free to convert to Christianity, and Christians are not free to practice their faith. The Koran is not a rights-respecting document.

Under Islam, life is a closed book. Everything has been decided for you: the dictates of sharia and the whims of Allah set strict limits on the possible agenda of your life. In the West, we have the choice to pursue our desires and ambitions. We are free as individuals to set the goals and determine the contents of our own lives, and to decide what meaning to give to our lives. As Roger Scruton remarks, "the glory of the West is that life is an open book."² The West has given us the liberal miracle of individual rights and responsibility and merit. Rather than the chains of inherited status, Western society offers unparalleled social mobility. The West, Alan Kors writes, "is a society of ever richer, more varied, more productive and more self-defined, and more satisfying lives."³

Instead of the mind-numbing certainties and dictates of Islam, Western civilization offers what Bertrand Russell called liberating doubt.⁴ Even the process of politics in the West involves trial and error, open discussion, criticism and self-correction.⁵ The quest for knowledge no matter where it leads, a desire inherited from the Greeks, has produced an institution that is rarely equaled outside the West: the university. And the outside world recognizes the superiority of Western universities. Easterners come to the West to learn not only about the sciences developed in the last five hundred years, but also about their own cultures, about Eastern civilizations and languages. They come to Oxford and Cambridge, to Harvard and Yale, to Heidelberg and the Sorbonne to acquire their doctorates because these degrees confer prestige unrivalled by similar credentials from Third World countries.

Western universities, research institutes, and libraries are created to be independent institutions where the pursuit of truth is conducted in a spirit of disinterested inquiry, free from political pressures. The basic difference between the West and the Rest might be summed up as a difference in epistemological principles. Behind the success of modern Western societies, with their science and technology and their open institutions, lies a distinct way of looking at the world, interpreting it, and rectifying problems: by lifting them out of the religious sphere and treating them empirically, finding solutions in rational procedures. The whole edifice of modern science is one of Western man's greatest gifts to the world.⁶ The West is responsible for almost every major scientific discovery of the last five hundred years, from heliocentrism and the telescope, to electricity, to computers.

The West has given the world the symphony and the novel. A culture that engendered the spiritual creations of Mozart and Beethoven, Wagner and Schubert, of Raphael and Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and Rembrandt does not need lessons in spirituality from societies whose vision of heaven resembles a cosmic brothel stocked with virgins for men's pleasure.

The West gave us the Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders, Human Rights

Watch, Amnesty International, and many other manifestations of the humanitarian impulse. It is the West that provides the bulk of the aid to beleaguered Darfur while Islamic countries are conspicuous by their absence.

The West does not need lectures on the superior virtue of societies where women are kept in subjection, endure genital mutilation, are married off against their will at the age of nine, have acid thrown in their faces or are stoned to death for alleged adultery, or where human rights are denied to those regarded as belonging to lower castes.⁷ The West does not need sanctimonious homilies from societies that cannot provide clean drinking water or sewage systems for their populations, that cannot educate their citizens but leave 40 to 50 percent of them illiterate, that make no provision for the handicapped, that have no sense of the common good or civic responsibility, that are riddled with corruption.

No Western politician would be able to get away with the kind of racist remarks that are tolerated in the Third World, such as the anti-Semitic diatribes of the Malaysian leader Mahathir Mohamad. Instead, there would be calls for resignation, both from Third World leaders and from Western media and intellectuals. Double standards? Yes, but also a tacit acknowledgment that we expect higher ethical standards from the West.

The Ayatollah Khomeini once famously said there are no jokes in Islam. The West is able to look at its own foibles and laugh, even make fun of its own fundamental principles. There is no Islamic equivalent to Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. Can we look forward to seeing *The Life of Mo* anytime in the future?

The rest of the world recognizes the virtues of the West in concrete ways. As Arthur Schlesinger remarked, "when Chinese students cried and died for democracy in Tiananmen Square, they brought with them not representations of Confucius or Buddha but a model of the Statue of Liberty."⁸ Millions of people risk their lives trying to get to the West—not to Saudi Arabia or Iran or Pakistan. They flee from theocratic or other totalitarian regimes to find tolerance and freedom in the West, where life is an open book.

CHAPTER ONE

NEW YORK, NEW YORK; OR, LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

The beauty of the idea of the pursuit of happiness. Familiar words, easy to take for granted; easy to misconstrue.

—V. S. NAIPAUL, "OUR UNIVERSAL CIVILIZATION," 1990

I had originally thought of using the city of New York as a metaphor or even synecdoche for the West, but it is unfair to ask even such a great city to assume that burden of responsibility; and besides, New York, like life, is its own excuse. Nonetheless, no other city in the West—or indeed, in the world—so well exemplifies the inexhaustible possibilities of a modern metropolis, where the inventive and enterprising put into practice the many freedoms guaranteed under the U.S. Constitution. The implausible, well-nigh-miraculous functioning anarchy that we know as New York is adorned with every excellence of Western art. It is a city of manifold suggestions, which ministers to every ambition, engenders a thousand talents, nurtures ingenuity and experimentation. Henry James, going up the East River, found the wide waters of New York exhilarating.¹ But it was left to P. G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster to discover the what and why of New York:

The odd part of it was that after the first shock of seeing all this frightful energy the thing didn't seem so strange. I've spoken to fellows since who have been to New York, and they tell me they found it just the same. Apparently there's something in the air, either the ozone or the phosphate or something, which makes you sit up and take notice. A kind of zip, as they were. A sort of bally freedom, if you know what I mean, that gets in your blood and bucks you up, and makes you feel that "God's in His Heaven: All's right with the world," and you don't care if you've got odd socks on.²

A sort of bally freedom, yes indeed.

Many New Yorkers take all they are offered for granted. Some even complain about the inadequacies of the subway system, or the schools, or the parks, or the lack of facilities for the disabled. But they do so because New York itself has already created expectations that are high and growing higher, and because people have the constitutional right to complain, to petition their government, or to vote out the incompetent politicians. While cities such as Cairo or Delhi or Mumbai have yet to solve such elemental problems as overflowing sewage in the garbage-filled streets and are unable to provide clean water for millions, New

York disposes of over 25,000 tons of garbage a day and provides drinking water to a population of 8.36 million by drawing over 1.2 billion gallons daily from reservoirs, some of which are a hundred miles from the city.

Living just down the street from a subway station, I am inconvenienced by ongoing construction work, but I realize that the city is taking its responsibilities seriously and performing the ever necessary task of renovating the infrastructure at a cost of several billion dollars a year. In addition to government expenditure to improve the lives of citizens, billions are invested by private concerns to renew the city's energy and telecommunication infrastructure. And what a service New York City provides for its inhabitants! Every day, approximately seven million people use the subway, which boasts 722 miles of railway track, while more than four million use the bus system. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which oversees the public transit system, practices moral responsibility in the effort it makes to meet the needs of the disabled, such as by fitting buses with special lifts for wheelchair users. The MTA's website offers information in over thirty languages, mirroring the ethnic mix of New York.

There are more than a million students in New York's public elementary, middle, and high schools, and another 200,000 in the city's public university. The city's public hospitals cope with over a million emergencies each year. One of the glories of New York City is its system of parks, covering nearly 27,000 acres, over 13 percent of the city's land area.³ Far from being an environmental disaster, New York is, in some ways, a model of ecological responsibility. With 82 percent of Manhattanites using public transportation or going to work on foot or bicycle, the consumption of fossil fuels is far less in New York than in many other big cities.⁴

The multifarious interests of free men and women are mirrored in the extraordinary number of activities available for the enthusiast, the curious, the intellectually and culturally alert. Even a cursory look at the hundred or so pages of the weekly magazine *Time Out New York*—which tries to list or review every single cultural or intellectual event in the city—leaves one breathless at the myriad possibilities for cultural nourishment: from classical music and opera to popular open-air concerts; from off-Broadway plays to Shakespeare in the Park; from an exhibition of the paintings of James Ensor to the glories of the permanent collections at the Frick and the Metropolitan Museum of Art; from book signing at Barnes & Noble to the Center for Book Arts; from the Natural History Museum to the New York Historical Society.

New York is a testament to the robustness of Western culture and to its welcoming catholicity, giving equal attention, respect, and opportunities to workers and artists from an astonishing number of both Western and non-Western countries. Korean and Chinese violinists, East European and Gypsy melodies, Afro-Peruvian jazz, paintings from Tibet and Nepal, plays from Japan, Iran, Budapest, Argentina, South Africa, and the Congo—all are embraced and become part of the cultural landscape, perhaps to be imitated at some later date. Every ethnic community has the space to celebrate and promote its particular experience, and also to teach the rest of us, broadening our horizons and knowledge: from the Latino musical *In the Heights* by Lin-Manuel Miranda and

Quiara Alegria Hudes, to the Indian-themed play *D'Arranged Marriage* by Taru Mohanbhai and Rajeev Varma. Art galleries and museums offer a wide-ranging aesthetic fare: Gustave Caillebotte, Sun K. Kwak, and "Light of the Sufis: The Mystical Arts of Islam" were all on view at the Brooklyn Museum at the same time; the Asia Society presented "Asian Journeys: Collecting Art in Post-war America" and "Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest"; the Rubin Museum featured the eighteenth-century Tibetan artist Situ Panchen and a photo exhibit on the "Nagas: Hidden Hill People of India"; and so on.



TIN PAN ALLEY AND THE GREAT AMERICAN SONGBOOK

Rose Gershwin, mother of the composer George, dined at Lindy's on Broadway nearly every night after her husband's death in 1932.⁵ Whether or not she met the motley crew of smalltime hoodlums who also ate there—such as Izzie Cheesecake, Franky Ferocious, Milk Ear Willie, Nicely Nicely, Dave the Dude—is pleasing to think of Rose sitting in the restaurant made famous by Damon Runyon as Mindy's, a symbol of popular song meeting New York theater, Tin Pan Alley intersecting Broadway, and yielding sophisticated musical comedies. Le "Lindy" Lindermann opened his deli and restaurant at 1626 Broadway in 1922 between 49th and 50th streets. A branch opened at 1655 Broadway in 1923. Lindy's appears in the Frank Loesser musical *Guys and Dolls* (1950), which is based on Runyon's writings and peopled with characters of dubious morality and even more dubious albeit colorful syntax.

Tin Pan Alley was a real place in New York City, West 28th Street between Fifth and Sixth avenues, where a plaque on the sidewalk tells us that this was "where the business of the American popular song flourished during the first decades of the 20th Century." Tin Pan Alley was also the publishing business that hired composers and lyricists to create popular songs, with success depending on how many copies of sheet music were sold. Pace the plaque, Tin Pan Alley moved uptown between 1903 and 1908, toward West 42nd Street; from 1911 to 1919 most of the publishers settled the West Forties. In 1931, when the Brill Building was completed at Broadway and 49th Street, not far from Lindy's, the popular music publishing industry acquired a permanent home.⁶

The story of Tin Pan Alley and Broadway is the story of New York, of popular song, of musical comedy, of American popular culture at its best. Many of the creators of the Great American Songbook were either born in New York or grew up there; were inspired by the city, tried to evoke it, or paid handsome tribute to it. Jerome Kern (1885–1945) was born in Sutton Place, the city's brewery district but grew up on East 56th Street. Irving Berlin (1888–1989) was born in Russia but from the age of five he lived on the Lower East Side, Cherry Street, and the Bowery; later he worked in Chinatown and Union Square. As he became more and more successful, Berlin changed addresses several times, living on Riverside Drive, West 46th Street, and West 72nd Street, before settling at 17 Beekman Place, in a residential enclave close to the East River extending from 49th to 51st Street. It was not far from where Kern was born. Berlin is responsible for the Music Box Theater, an architectural landmark at 236 West 45th Street, between Broadway and Eighth Avenue, built in 1920 in a style that evokes English Georgian. George Gershwin (1898–1937) was born in Brooklyn but spent nearly all of his childhood and adolescence in Manhattan, attending schools in Harlem.

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