

## CHAPTER 16

# Clarion II

April 22, 1861<sup>1</sup>

### *On Civilization*

Countrymen,

We have touched upon the issue of civilization many times in our previous pamphlets. Since many people of this generation are preoccupied with this topic, and since the spirit of the age is strongly inclined toward seeking it, and reaping its fruits, many are in danger of falling victim to false assumptions about the concept. They tend to mistake fake as well as traditional forms of civilization for the real thing. They remain content with the former as opposed to pursuing the latter, having convinced themselves that they maintain a firm grip on it. In reality, they are still very far from it. Therefore, we have decided to explain to our compatriots briefly what civilization is and how it is attained.

Let us not delve into its benefits and pleasures for now. There is no time, and no need given the overwhelming tendency to believe in its enjoyments. Instead, we will argue the following: Civilization originally comes from the word *city*. This derivation

can either be based on the distinction between city and nomadic desert or village and countryside. In the first instance, civilization refers to the lifestyle of sedentary people as opposed to the lifestyle of nomads, who know no civilization. In the second instance, its contradistinction to the village refers to the city's comfortable lifestyle, architectural order, and the like, which city dwellers erroneously claim are absent in the countryside among peasants and villagers.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of civilization has been expanded since then to mean inward and outward cultivation of the self and the attainment of knowledge, culture, and virtue. It is no secret that in this world man is in one of two states: one of wilderness and barbarity, or one of civilization and grace. The state of barrenness is the natural state into which man is born. If he stays in it, there is little difference between him and dumb animals and the damage he causes would be greater than that of animals. As for the state of civilization, it is a consequence of the gradual cultivation in manners and morals through emulation, hard work, and diligence. Only those with a proclivity toward these attributes reach their highest form.

The relation of wild humans to civilized humans is often presented as the relation of the ignorant to the wise, the animal to the human, darkness to light, and the blind to the seeing. It appears like the relation of monstrous flesh-eaters in distant Africa to the notables and dignitaries of Paris and England or the relation of desert Arabs to those living in Beirut. But contrary to such representations, civilization can be superficial and fake when based on the imitation and appropriation of certain foreign characteristics, customs, and habits rather than on fundamental, real, and contemporary principles. The bearer of this type of civilization resembles a drum—great in size and sound

but hollow on the inside and totally unusable after the slightest damage. His relation to true civilization is like a shadow's relation to a body, or illusion's relation to reality. As for true civilization, in a nutshell, it is that universal state of society that suits the development of all the forces of the human race, individually and collectively.

Civilization is, therefore, not confined to a single thing or to particular forms of knowledge among the populace, such as sciences or trades, for example. Rather, its essential end being development, it includes all sorts of affairs organized in a social structure. Subject to certain connections, civilization starts with the human being's inner self and then extends outward. The primary objective of civilization is growth. For the success of humans does not rest on the accumulation of personal wealth—whatever this wealth may be. Instead, it rests on the growth and expansion of their faculties and their appropriate use according to the original purpose for which they were meant. Humans were not created in the form of a sponge that absorbs all it can from the world's material wealth but, rather, in the image of an ever-growing, fruit-bearing tree. Nor do their success, virtue, and happiness rest on the wealth and knowledge they have accumulated and acquired for themselves. Instead, it rests on the useful deeds they can bring to bear on society. As the poet says:

Whoever does no good in someone else's name  
To me, his presence or absence is the same.

Based on the previous definition, it is clear that the mission and meaning of true civilization remain incomplete if they do not aid in the overall development and progress, both materially and morally, of humans. This is because the nurture of one's body alone reduces him to an animal; the nurture of body and mind less the morals reduces him to the devil incarnate; and the

nurture of mind alone makes of him a possible contributor to world ruin and the total fading out of the human race. True civilization, then, looks at each of those forces—body, mind, and culture—with a balanced perspective and gives them their appropriate attention according to their relative standing and virtue. This is to be done by rewarding the most virtuous with virtue and the most vicious with vice, both collectively and individually. We say so for the following reasons.

First, true civilization elevates a people by elevating each member one by one—men as well as women. Second, true civilization is not concerned with one segment of the populace to the exclusion of another but places everyone on an equal footing. Now, if we compare the previous definition of civilization to how it was practiced by Greeks, Romans, and Arabs of past generations, we observe two shortcomings: these civilizations did not cultivate all the different aspects of the individual, and civilization was not present among all its peoples. It was like a house without a roof or a vault without the pivotal stone. It was hence of little use, short-lived, and with meager benefits for current generations.

Likewise, if we examine Europe's current civilization in light of this definition, we see that it is lacking in many ways. Many bearers of progress there seek their own private good, and guard their power and privilege more than they care for the development of knowledge and culture among their people. Thus, we see over there knowledge, kindness, and discipline next to ignorance, vulgarity, cruelty, drunkenness, and excessive self-love, not to mention obscene customs. For regardless of how eminent and glamorous a given civilization appears, only adhering to the healthy principles of common sense will put it on the right path. Otherwise its existence will be troubled and short, and its sway weak and poor.

As for Syria, we were proud that before last year's unrest, the country had set its left foot on the first step of the ladder of civilization. We were hopeful that it would, in a short time, reach the highest echelons. As for now, we have no other recourse than to cover our mouth with our hands and await what future days and God's Providence hold in store for us.

Countrymen,

Anything precious in this life is susceptible to imitation and forgery. The more precious and desired it is, the more efforts forgers make to reproduce a copy and present it to the public as genuine. The same way commodities, foodstuffs, and medicine are forged, so, too, is the precious and sought-after commodity that is civilization. We see our present generation in clear danger of adopting, for various reasons, a brand of civilization that neither merits the name nor bears the fruits of true civilization. This generation is so heavily dependent on this fake form that we fear that it may become too content with it, thereby stalling success.

Westerners have collectively attained great levels of civilization, higher than that achieved by Easterners, including the children of these lands that, in times passed, produced the cradle of civilization, centers of knowledge and glamour. It is thus feared that many of our compatriots who are more inclined toward imitation and more capable of it will be content with mimicking Western customs, clothes, and traits. For everything foreign is enjoyable and everything new is alluring, and our era is dominated by the West, whose customs and taste hold more sway than those of the East. Those who engage in such mimicry are under the illusion that their conduct suffices to mark them as civilized and to have them regarded in higher esteem than their

own kin and countrymen. What they are oblivious to is that such imitation makes them strangers in the eyes of their compatriots and despicable imposters of customs, unworthy of the clothes they wear, in the eyes of foreigners.

Like any reasonable person, we would not dispute that acquiring good qualities from wherever in the world is desirable, or that many of the benefits of civilization come from the West and many people of Europe deserve full respect. We nevertheless cannot blindly take for granted that everything coming to us from there is in itself useful and compatible with the good progress of Easterners, who, like all people, are fundamentally shaped by their country's atmosphere. Those who are willing to clutch at anything that comes their way from Europe without precise examination, sound criticism, and the strict selection of what is useful in terms of progress and refinement on par with Westerners are fooling themselves. They do not distinguish much between a forged dirham and a genuine dinar. They are patching up worn clothes with new rags. That is how people are.

It is no secret that anyone who shuns anything Western solely for being Western and applauds anything Arab solely for being Arab, or vice versa, falls into harmful extremism. People are naturally more inclined toward exterior rather than inner matters. They clutch more at appearance than at essence—especially regarding things like science and religion that require intensity of thought, prudent contemplation, and sharp inquiry. People apply themselves to the matter of civilization in a similar manner. They think that civilization is based on lifestyle, the way houses are laid out, how exquisite clothes are, eating at a table, making polite conversation, mixing of women and men, the acquisition of a foreign language, and the like. Overall, these practices have no benefit other than damage to people's character

and personal virtues that set them apart as members of a notable and chosen community. In fact, such matters are the mere leaves or the bark of civilization. They are the most immaterial outcomes and least useful benefits. They are foreign fruits suspended temporarily on the tail end of the tree of civilization. As a poet once said:

Do not be impressed by a man's attire.  
 About his manners you must inquire!  
 Were it not for the fragrance a branch emits  
 The difference between branches and firewood would not exist.

Countrymen,

Many means of civilization have been elucidated in previous pamphlets. Some are more important than others. The first of those is religion. We do not mean any religion. Rather, we mean true religion as revealed from God. True religion is the foundation of true civilization. The freer this religion is from impurities bound to seep into every aspect of people's lives, the purer the civilization that results from it is. Furthermore, any religion that holds ignorance as the father of faith and stupidity as the mother of piety cannot serve as a sound foundation for civilization.

The second is political authority. We do not mean any type of authority. Rather, our reference is to government concerned with the welfare of its subjects, their prosperity, their professional success, and their progress in knowledge, wealth, and civilization. In this sense political authority becomes a model that offers strong and effective measures to spread civilization among them. Whoever has noticed the strong connection and relationship between government and subjects will agree with us that no civilized people survive under uncivilized rule. Conversely, no civilized rule is possible over an uncivilized people because

the two are intertwined. How true rings the adage “You get the government you deserve.”

The third is the means of acquiring cultural morals, such as schools, printing houses, newspapers, commerce, and the like, which bring people closer together like one family. Whatever the means to civilization, it is agreed upon that individuals and peoples acquire it gradually rather than in one fell swoop. The easier it is for the people to access these means and the more widespread they are among its elites and commoners, the stronger, faster, firmer, and more practical civilization becomes.

Countrymen,

We believe that two factors, frequently mentioned in our previous patriotic tracts, are essential today to civilizing our compatriots: The first one is concord among them as individuals and groups. This is especially the case regarding civic concord, whose existence or lack thereof depend more on the strength, activity, and will power of authorities than on the whims of ordinary people and their various biases. As for heartfelt religious concord, it surprises us little that it has become difficult, if not impossible, to attain after what happened and given the fatal stagnation that has gripped our homeland’s religions and laws.

The second factor is love of the homeland in general, and placing its interest ahead of selfish ones, whether personal or sectarian, in particular. As long as our compatriots do not feel that this is their homeland and their country, there is no hope that they love it or care for its welfare. Rather, they would always be disunited, each one seeking what they imagine is useful to them or to their faction.

It is well known that any house or piece of property that is divided is doomed for destruction. Therefore, relying on the



wishes and opinions of Syrians to fix the situation in the country is like asking for the impossible or like expecting the sick and the guilty to heal and judge themselves. Even if we were to acknowledge that Syrians know their own good, we cannot assume that they all agree on it. Furthermore, if they decided to agree, there is little hope that they will be allowed to enjoy it. Hence, this country is heading in an extremely dangerous direction. There is no hope for this country's reconstruction or salvation from ruin, unless God guides its people into the right direction, or, through His extraordinary providence, supplies effective and unprejudiced means to civilization, or at least puts it on the path to safety and success.

We cannot do anything now except bemoan this unfortunate country, a country that has become victim to such divergent prejudices and personal interests and home to so few patriots . . .

May God preserve you.

From a patriot