About 350 years after Galileo (1564–1642), one of the greatest scientists of the 17th century, was summoned to Rome during the Papacy of Pope Urban VIII (1623–1644), tried by the Inquisition and under threat of torture forced to abjure belief in the Copernican system (1633), the Catholic Church admitted its error. Pope Urban’s reign coincided with the period of Church’s decline as political manipulators in Europe (the Thirty Years War (1618–1648) between Catholics and Protestants, and the rapid growth of Protestantism in Germany) and tried, unsuccessfully as was inevitable, to prolong the myth that the Earth was the center of the Universe (which was essential to the Church to maintain its primacy in accordance with the Creation story, as related in the Bible). In 1996, Pope John Paul II put the teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church firmly behind the view that the human body may not have been the immediate creation of God, but the product of a gradual process of evolution. Yet only a few years before (1950), Pope Pius XII (1939–1958), that infamous Pope of World War II, in his encyclical letter “Humani Generis,” strongly condemned evolution as playing into the hands of naturalists and atheists, who, the Pope declared, sought to remove the hand of God from the act of Creation. In May 1995, Pope John Paul II, in a visit to the Czech Republic declared, “Today I, the Pope of the Church of Rome, in the name of all Catholics, ask forgiveness for the wrongs inflicted on non-Catholics during the turbulent history of these peoples … We forgive and ask for forgiveness.” This kindly Pope should have been reminded to also ask forgiveness for the wrongs inflicted on the many saintly Catholic martyrs and innocent Catholic men and women burned at the stake, accused of witchcraft by the Church. The reasonableness and moderation displayed by Pope John Paul II (and a few of his immediate predecessors) reflect a pragmatic and judicious attitude of the Catholic Church to the changed circumstances—loss of political influence. The bloody civil war in Northern Ireland pitting Protestants against Catholics; the murder of Catholic nuns in Central America; the persecution of Catholic clergy in the former Soviet Union and present-day China; the persecution of Catholic clergy in India; all happening in the last quarter of the 20th century, took their course unaffected by the concerns of the Vatican. It is true that Pope John Paul II rallied the spirit and resistance of the Catholic Polish nation to overthrow the Communist regime, but the Pope’s Polish origin must be recognized as one of the factors. The Polish people, throughout recent history and past centuries, have been vehemently patri-

The Civilizing Influence of Monotheisms Questioned

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Arthur Blech, a commercial real estate developer and cattle rancher, is also the author of several books on critical issues facing society. This article, “The Civilizing Influence of Monotheisms Questioned,” is Chapter 4, Part Five of his book, Toward a New Civilization: Why We Must Tame Our Instincts to Save Our World (Prometheus, 2005). We reprint it in its entirety and with the permission of the publisher.
otic and always motivated by a remarkable nationalist fervor. But Poland was an exception, for it must be remembered that not so long ago (1939) the Polish foreign minister (Beck) condemned the Vatican (Pope Pius XII) in the most vehement terms for betraying the Polish people in favor of Nazi Germany.

It would be a mistake to feel complacent about the present moderation of Christianity and the unaccustomed restraint shown. For not deep beneath the calm facade, a new species of intolerant and evangelizing fundamentalist forces are raising their voice preaching a literal interpretation of the Bible, dispensing with, and mostly ignorant of, the turbulent and belligerent past 2,000 years history of Christianity."

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Christian leaders boldly assert that Christianity is not only fundamental to civilization but has contributed a major share to its perpetuation. This claim is based on these basic foundations:

(a) Belief in the saving power of the God of Christianity.
(b) The teaching of morality, as described in the sayings of Jesus related in the Gospels.
(c) The Greco-Roman literary classics were preserved for posterity by the Christian monasteries.

(a) Christian monotheism (one has to be broad-minded to make this assertion) is no different than that of Judaism or Islam, i.e., the belief in one supernatural Supreme Being. Whereas both Judaism and Islam had the idea of God well defined at inception, Christianity had no clear idea of the nature of God in the early centuries of its existence, but progressively defined and redefined the relationship between God and Jesus over several centuries, selectively refining the concept by majority vote of clerical conciliar assemblies until Jesus, the man, became consubstantial with God, one perfect union and one perfect meeting of divinity and humanity. It is unclear whether the promulgators of this new and unique theology ever formulated a distinct concept in their mind of this
Christianity that its teachings and practical application are tinged with fundamentalist proclivities. The claim of There is no compatibility or affinity between civilization and ema to any religious faith inclined toward fundamentalism.

tolere and sacrificing his life for his sins and who offers everlasting salvation in the afterlife for following the prescribed faith, but it encourages unthinking obedience, conformity and constant fear of transgression, attitudes not conducive to civilized behavior. To live a life of pious resignation in order to gain salvation in heaven may lead to uplifting spirituality and godliness but is prone to self-seeking, submission, orthodoxy and distrust of dissent, qualities which do not foster a morality applicable to the generality of mankind. It is no wonder that such people are easily provoked to defend their faith by any means necessary; however violent, to persecute and punish those who strayed from orthodoxy or are foreign to the practiced religion, and whose influence is viewed as a danger to their salvation. The herd instinct brings forth an evangelizing fervor to assimilate others to the established faith, conform to the rule or, failing that, appease God’s anger by eliminating their presence from divine sight. Such attitudes and temperament can explain the drastic religious and bloody upheavals of past centuries which, regrettable, despite all the progress in science and secular education of the majority, are reappearing with a strain of vehemence reminiscent of past passions.

There is enough historical literature on the subject of prior religious excesses to warn the wary and concerned not to permit a return to the abominations of the past without exerting every effort to deflect the intended course and to preserve the freedom of conscience and thought for those anxious to exercise it, for which freedom so much was sacrificed. But this trend toward a modern version of religious fundamentalism is also evident in the religious movement of Judaism and Islam and the above analysis is applicable, almost verbatim, to them as well (the followers of Reform Judaism or Unitarianism and several other similar offshoots of mainstream religions are not likely to be influenced by the rising fervor of fundamentalism). Any form of faith that preaches exclusivity, preeminence of its doctrines, salvation limited to the elect and damnation for others, intolerance of dissent, demands conformity and unquestioning obedience to its teaching, demands bigotry as a religious duty and ostracizes or punishes the skeptic—such a faith is antithetical to the concept of civilization and radically opposed to what it stands for (but this is exactly what the Bible teaches). To the previously defined aspects of civilization must be added freedom of speech and thought, the right to hold differing views without fear of repercussions, the right of privacy and freedom to choose, the discretion to read or publish any books, study or teach any subject—all these proud achievements of civilized man gained at such great cost, are all anathema to any religious faith inclined toward fundamentalism. There is no compatibility or affinity between civilization and religions tinged with fundamentalist proclivities. The claim of Christianity that its teachings and practical application are fundamental to civilization is false and without basis. Likewise false and without basis would be such claims asserted on behalf of Judaism and Islam, and for the same reasons. These three religions and the potential for passions and violence they arouse are incompatible with the concepts civilization stands for.

(b) Of the three monotheistic religions reviewed above, Christianity is the only one which claims preeminence of its moral teaching and asserts that its moral code, based upon the sayings of Jesus as related in the Gospels, is the foundation of civilized conduct. This claim is false and contradicts all credible historical and religious evidence: there is little connection between morality and Christian imposed conduct; it is tenuous at best.

In the struggle for self-preservation, when satisfaction of primary needs are at stake, all means at man’s disposal are applied to gain the desired ends and no methods, however injurious and unfavorable to others, are precluded out of consideration for morality. The application of moral codes in situations threatening survival or the well-being are luxuries a man can ill afford and would do so at his own peril. For the prudent man will not treat the preservation of his basic interests as a sport which is the domain of fair play and gentlemanly conduct. It is virtuous for man to strive for perseverance in existence and maintenance of primary creature comforts and to do so with all means at his disposal—regard for morality, religiously induced or otherwise, never played a conclusive role in such efforts, although there have been cases of intentional self-destruction (in whatever form) but such acts, by definition, served the perpetrator’s interests.

It is well to define the concept of morality, as distinguished from ethics. Ethics is a code of conduct conducive to an atmosphere of social tranquility; the compliance of which can be enforced by penal provisions. Such a code is typically mandated by an institution of authority, i.e., a government, to promote harmony and facilitate untroubled and peaceful intercourse among its inhabitants. The prudent government leaders will only seek laws to promote such conduct which can be enforced and provide appropriate sanctions for violators. Ethics is only a small part of morality. That part of morality which does not embrace ethics deals with conduct conducive to the promotion of compatibility and amity among men which cannot be enforced by sanctions and which elicit approval, admiration and esteem of humanity in general. Transgressors face censure and opprobrium by the offended or harmed. Examples of the former are: laws against perjury, theft, murder, polygamy, prostitution, libel, bearing false witness, abuse of children, etc. Examples of the latter are: charity toward poor and weak, orphans and infirm, care of others’ needs, kindness to animals, respect for parents, helping a neighbor or friend, tolerating dissent, kindness to children, keeping one’s promise, tolerance of other religions or views, etc. Ethics and morality can never be in conflict. The degree of morality is the measure of civilization; the control of the savage instincts of man by civilized, i.e., moralizing, his conduct and making him fit for a harmonious community life.

What are the sayings of Jesus as reflected in the Gospels which support Christianity’s claim of indispensability to civilization? Almost all of the moral preachings of Jesus are taken from the Old Testament and are of Hebrew not Christian origin; so is the golden rule and the Sermon on the Mount, point-
ed with pride by Christians as the sublime crowning essence of their morality. As for the other sayings not of Hebrew origin, to turn the other cheek, to give to anyone who asks, not to turn anyone away who wants to borrow, not to worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will take care of itself, anyone who humbles himself will be exalted, sell everything and give your money to the poor; bless those who curse you, do not ask for your property back from the man who robs you, to lend without any hope of return, to love one’s enemies, to do good to those who hate you—can anyone really believe that such totally absurd, impractical, visionary and imprudent advice, standing morality on its head, wholly incompatible with human nature and going against all conventions, could be offered by a divine personage possessing the wisdom of heaven? Or that the suggested conduct could have any influence on the civilized conduct of man, on civilization? Or will such counsel confuse, demoralize and frustrate anyone wishing to follow the divine precepts? Elsewhere, what are the well-to-do to think of Matthew 19:23-24, "... it will be hard for the rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven"? Matthew did not enlighten the reader about the definition of "rich man." It was the wealthy, those extremely wealthy Christians, who contributed lavishly toward the building of Churches, to the financial support of the Roman Church and the Papacy during the Dark Ages (for a time the wealthy Jewish Pierleoni banking family was the sole support of the Church) when such support saved the Roman Church from financial disaster. The funds were gratefully accepted and the donor graced with the most lavish papal blessings. And it was the faithful rich who were the most prolific purchasers of papal indulgences and thus bribed their entry into heaven. Pope Alexander VI (1492-1503) amassed a great fortune as Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia; Pope Leo X (1513-1521), son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, the wealthy Florentine banker, both, as Vicars of Christ, had no difficulty dealing with their or other people's riches. What is one to think of John 8:7-8, "If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him cast the first stone at her"? There are no perfect humans, everyone has sinned at one time or another; does that mean that no one should ever accuse another of any misdeeds, however outrageous? No judicial administration would be possible. What about all the accusations of ritual murder; image desecration and desecration of the consecrated host invented by the clergy? All these later were admitted by the Church to have been false and the Jews unjustly vilified.

But even some of the objectionable moral teaching of Jesus which are wholly impractical and unsuited as guides for moral conduct (such as, to love one’s enemies, to bless those who curse you), which Christianity claims as its own by virtue of original revelations in the Gospels, were propounded over 2,000 years before Christianity in a collection of Babylonian precepts in a more literate and discreet version:

(i) Subdue the passions of the senses.
(ii) Be charitable to your neighbor.
(iii) Have pity on those who deserve pity.

It condemned any effort to seek salvation by sacrificial or ritual acts; that a state of happiness is attainable in this life through the complete elimination of selfish desires; that we possess everything within us to find ourselves richer if we just shut our eyes and our hearts against the illusion of the world. It admonishes man to follow certain fundamental moral precepts: generosity, benevolence, cooperation, service, courtesy, sympathy and honesty. But what is most important, it taught tolerance of other religions and beliefs; that meditation alone can secure salvation; that the human mind cannot conceive God except behind the veil of human language; it did not claim to possess exclusivity or preeminence. This is an eternity removed from the crude anthropomorphism of monotheistic religions, which falsely took credit for a morality they did not originate. What a breath of fresh air. What a nobility of spirit. What a present to the dignity of man and contribution to civilized conduct—no supernatural revelations, no divine punishment for transgressions, no miracles or colloquy with a Deity needed to teach man the obvious: the importance of moral conduct and getting on with his fellowmen based on common sense. All this was part of the religious teachings of the Upanishads, a segment of literature of the Veda, the Bible of the Brahmans, which came into existence about a thousand years before Christianity. It influenced Gautama Buddha (563 B.C.-483 B.C.), the founder of Buddhism.

(c) It must be granted without any hesitation that the Greco-Roman literary classics, such as the works of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, were preserved for posterity by Christian monasteries, the dwellings of monks and clerics living a communal life separated from the rest of society. One cannot help but recall the Essenes of the Qumran community, members of a small Jewish religious order, living in a highly organized monastic fraternity, originating in the 2nd century B.C., and who lived apart from the rest of the Judean population. They held possessions in common, led a life dedicated to piety and ritual purity and refused to immerse themselves in public life. But most importantly, they were responsible for preserving for posterity that treasure of biblical writings referred to as the "Dead Sea Scrolls." Their order of lifestyle and organization must have served as a prototype to the founders of Christian monasteries and monastic orders.

Members of the Christian monastic orders had occasion to transcribe, among many others, some of the works of the Greco-Roman classical literature and thus preserve them for posterity in their libraries, handed down from generation to generation. Thanks to their efforts, the scholars of the Middle Ages (until the invention of the printing press in the 15th century) were able to study some of the preserved ancient literature. Their thoughts, discussions and writings made a valuable contribution to the gradual development of civilization.