

*Historical Justice or the Dusk of the West?
Messianism and Catastrophism in the Inter-War Philosophical Thought*

Marek N. Jakubowski, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Poland

The Asian Conference on Ethics, Religion & Philosophy 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

A quarter-century ago F. Fukuyama announced the end of history, understood in Hegelian terms as a process of a realization of the consciousness of freedom. His statement was immediately met with criticism (with the harshest one coming from S. P. Huntington), stating that further course of history, understood as a process of conflicts between civilizations, is inevitable and it does not bode well for the West (the post-Roman civilization). Many events that took place in the last 20 years indicate that it was Huntington and like-minded philosophers who were right.

From a today's perspective it is worth looking at philosophical concepts born in the inter-war period. Those concepts were an attempt to conceptualize history after the calamities that took place in the beginning of that century (especially the World War I- at the time called the World War- and the Bolshevik revolution, that nearly spread to the whole of Europe). Rather natural philosophical reaction to that were concepts representing various types of catastrophism, based on the thesis of the fragility of the Western civilization (O. Spengler, A. Toynbee and, in Poland, F. Koneczny). At the same time philosophical concepts alluding to philosophical messianism came into the picture.

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The events of the first two decades of the 20th century brought us: the Russo-Japanese war, which ended in the heavy defeat of the Russian navy in the battle of Tsushima, the first great defeat of Europe by Asia in centuries; the devastating First World War; and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. All led to the rebirth of the European philosophy of history. However, this rebirth did not continue the optimism of the Enlightenment or, in different terms, the Hegelian philosophy of history, which assumed that in history, regardless of any turbulence, a certain process is carried out, which leads to the goal, the realization of historical justice. From the perspective of the cataclysm of war, such optimism seemed pitifully naive and indefensible. The icon of this new philosophy of history was famous two-volume (1918-1922) “Der Untergang des Abendlandes” (The Decline of the West) by Oswald Spengler. Arnold Toynbee, the distinguished British historian and pragmatic political advisor, was initially enchanted by the Spenglerian vision of history, but quickly became aware of certain limitations in Spengler's ideas. They derived from *apriorism*, or dogmatism.

As a matter of fact Spengler's concept was not only *aprioristic*, but also highly metaphysical. This is shown in its central concept, the concept of culture. In Spengler's view it is possible to determine when a particular culture is born, or comes to an end, but it is impossible to determine its goal. “A culture is born in the moment when a great soul awakens out of proto-spirituality (dem urseelenhaften Zustande) of ever-childish humanity and detaches itself, a form from the formless, a bounded and mortal thing from the boundless and enduring. It blooms on the soil of an exactly-definable landscape, to which plant-wise it remains bound. It dies when this soul has actualized the full sum of its possibilities in the shape of peoples, languages, dogmas, arts, states, sciences, and reverts into the proto-soul.”¹ He sees it in the image of man, as something exceptional and unique. Just as men in their lifetime constitute a peculiar duality in unity, being “one” consisting of the body and the soul, culture consists of an idea, which is “culture as a possibility” and its objectification is “culture as reality”. It emerges from something resembling Aristotle's pure potentiality, from some pre-cultural, thus prehistoric state of humanity. This means that it is not humanity that becomes the subject of history (it can be said that humanity does not have history at all) but cultures. And so every culture is unique and untranslatable to other cultures. Culture is therefore the biggest unity and it is not the product of men (because it is culture that creates the “cultured” man) but the environment in which men and women fulfil themselves. A man that becomes a part of this highest unity creates what its subsequent parts - religion, art, science (philosophy), and also nations and countries. The fact that cultures are essentially impervious, that they resemble Leibniz's monads which “do not have windows”, does not mean that it is impossible to transfer some elements or solutions from one culture to another, but the transferred elements undergo reinterpretation in the new culture and become filled with different content characteristics.²

¹Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, Bd. I, Muenchen 1923, p. 142.

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²I believe that the Christian „domestication” of the Turkish (or Turkish-Arabic-Persian) “artifacts”, such as a saber, kontusz (type of outer garment, with long and loose sleeves, worn by the Polish nobility in XVII-XVIII century) or the accompanying belt (Slutsk belt) is a good illustration of Spengler's thesis.

Thus for Spengler culture is an organism, a unique spiritual and material singularity, so too is man - an individual. The consequence of such an understanding of culture is obvious - it is subject to the same laws that govern all organisms. So, first of all, cultures are not only born, but they also die: Spengler calculated the average lifespan of a culture at about 1,000 years. Cultures develop, but they also grow old. This aging of culture is nothing else but a kind of burning out, a weakening of its spirituality, which results in the disappearance of the characteristic tensions, which in turn are replaced by cool intellectualism. All forms of democracy, parliamentarianism, liberalism or political parties are political manifestations of old age. Thus, culture enters the phase of civilization. Spengler's distinction between culture and civilization is not dichotomous. Civilization is a stage of a culture (therefore it is a part of it), a stage of decline, the inevitable old age, its "twilight".

A catastrophe is not something inherently inevitable, it is - depending on what definition we decide to use - a sudden event, but not necessarily unexpected. Some of its early signs can thus be discerned. But catastrophe is not an inevitable event. Although the logic of events leading to it is inevitable, the onset of the catastrophe is not, as in a Greek tragedy. A death of an aging organism is not a catastrophe. Spengler is not - as he is commonly regarded - a philosophical catastrophist. His "twilight" signifies self-fulfilment (the closing of the day of life), as well as the gradual disappearance of spiritual forces. Catastrophic visions of history became particularly popular among Poles, who were treated exceptionally brutally by it. The concept of the plurality of civilizations, set out by Felix Koneczny in his writings from the 1930s, deserves special attention.³

Koneczny's basic thesis is this: it is not nations, neither the state nor humanity - which is simply a hypostasis ("a literary phantom") - but civilizations which are the subject of the historical process. There is therefore no universal civilization. Hence the universalism posited by the classical philosophy of history, in which humanity exists as a subject of history in an asynchronous fashion, was its primary error.

Koneczny distinguishes civilization from culture, but this distinction has nothing to do with the one that we find in the work of Oswald Spengler. However they did agree in two instances, namely, that cultures/civilizations are the subjects of history, and that they are closed monads. But these might be the only instances when they agreed with each other. The Polish historian accused Spengler of the fundamental error of *apriorism*; Koneczny considered himself the first significant historical and philosophical inductionist. A second fundamental accusation concerned the biologism of Spengler's concept of culture. Koneczny claims that although many civilizations went extinct, many of them survived, despite existing for millennia (the Chinese, the Brahmin or the Jewish civilizations).

³Koneczny Published his works only in Polish – although after World War II Anton Hilekman, a German professor teaching comparative civilizations and lecturer at the University of Mainz undertook an effort to popularize it. The major work of Koneczny "On the Plurality of Civilizations" was published in London in 1962 (with a foreword by Arnold Toynbee).

Two of Koneczny's concepts capture this complicated structure: Trilaw and Quincunx⁴. He derives Trilaw from the original ancestral system, so these are the three branches of private law (family law, property and inheritance law). Basic limits of civilization are set by the Quincunx. It concerns five main categories defining the social existence of people. They symbolize the unity of the spiritual and material civilization, which reflects the duality (and, at the same time, the unity) of man. So two of these categories relate to the spiritual realm of human social existence, two relate to the material realm, and the fifth combines these two spheres. Therefore Quincunx looks like this:

Goodness	Truth
	Beauty
Health	Prosperity

Goodness defines the sphere of morality; truth is the indicator of cognition (natural as well as supernatural - science and religion). Health defines the relationship of man with his own corporality. Prosperity is a category that describes most economic relationships, which not only result in a complex system of institutions but also in the ideas that are behind them. Beauty is the final category, which connects the spiritual and material (physical) side of social order. It is reflected in particular in art. These categories are mutually interrelated, so Quincunx is in fact a very complex network of institutions, values and ideas which define how civilizations function. As mentioned before, they are connected to the Trilaw system, thus the possibility of various configurations of the ideas and institutions is inexhaustible, and therefore the number of civilizations can be infinite. It is worth noting that the Trilaw system and the various institutions and ideas forming Quincunx may develop to various degrees, or even not form at all.

Koneczny strongly stresses that race does not influence the shape of civilization – different civilizations might exist within one race. Neither does language, but religion can have a significant impact.

The main component that distinguishes civilizations from one another is thought. “The diversity of human devices comes from the differences in human thought. [...] History is governed by abstracts.”⁵ The main problem is the relationship with god; it can be personal or collective. Thus civilizations can be divided into the personalistic and the collective. The personalistic civilizations are organisms, while the collective civilizations are mechanisms.⁶ An organism is understood here in a specific way. Koneczny understands the civilization organism as a whole, which is shaped in history as a result of conscious acts resulting from the best possible way of human mastery over time, which is historicism. Historicism is a particular way of understanding identity - individual and collective - through knowledge of the past and conscious acceptance of ancestral heritage, which ultimately allows an *a posteriori* thinking. Thus organism can be understood as diversity, activism or freedom, while for Koneczny mechanism is uniformity, passivity, coercion. In an organism there is

⁴Literally „five ounces”, five twelfths of a whole. By this Koneczny means a slanted cross, which is formed by a “fife” on a dice (this was also a term used by the Romans, to describe their plating method of fruit tree).

⁵ F. Koneczny, *O ład w historii*, Warszawa-Struga, 1991, p. 25.

⁶ This distinctions have an evaluative, not descriptive nature. This undermines Koneczny’s claim about creating a consequently inductionistic concept.

legal dualism, while in a mechanism there is monism. The point here is that some civilizations are based on only one law - private or public.

The number of “systems on which communal life is organized”, and therefore the amount of civilizations, can be infinite, although we can clearly distinguish 22 of them in history. Only 7 of them still exist, and 4 of them in particular (Latin, Byzantine, Jewish and Turanian) are the focus of Koneczny’s work.

It is easy to notice that the Latin civilization has a special place in this classification. It is individualistic, while the others are more or less collective. It is dominated by spiritual forces, rather than physical. For Koneczny, freedom is fulfilled only in Latin civilization. It is also the only one in which there is a clear distinction between private and public law. In this civilization, law derives from ethics. It is an “organism” not a “mechanism”. Only there does a consciousness of time exist, which leads to the emergence of a nation. Thus, for him, it is the only complete civilization.

What about the other three civilizations that are the focus of Koneczny's work? The Jewish civilization is sacral, and therefore it is "a system of collective life" directly resulting from “religious law”.⁷ In this civilization, therefore, law has its source in religion. The Turanian civilization has its origins in nomadic tribes of northeast Asia and as time passed it started to include eastern Slavs, represented by two cultures - Moscow (Russia), and the Cossack.

So where in Europe is the Byzantine civilization represented? Koneczny’s might surprise us – for him, the Germans are the representatives of this civilization. With time, Byzantine civilization succumbed to the more aggressive Turanian civilization, but it still exists in the West. It existed in Germany, to a smaller extent in Rhineland and a bigger in Prussia.

As the Bolshevik revolution was evidence of Russia representing the Turanian civilization, the taking of power by the Nazis was an evidence of Germany belonging to the Byzantine civilization.

Koneczny argued that “general history consists of the history of the relations between different civilizations. Those are subject to six fundamental laws: commensurability, expansion, inequality, impossibility of synthesis, negative effect of mixtures, facilitated inferiority. The highest of laws, the law of laws states: It is impossible to be civilized in two different ways.”⁸

The first of those laws is that every civilization remains stable as long as it is coherent, so the balance between all the conditions of organizing the “methods of social life” is retained. The second law states that every “living” civilization, thus a developing one, inevitably expands. A dialogue between civilizations is not possible, as it can only take place between cultures belonging to the same civilization. The third law - the law of inequality – is derived from the study of nature, as well as from historical induction. A lack of social inequality must therefore have devastating effects.

⁷ F. Koneczny, *Cywilizacja żydowska*, London 1974, p. 32.

⁸ F. Koneczny, *O ład w historii*, op. cit., p.66.

The next law states the impossibility of civilization synthesis. It is in fact a consequence of the first law (commensurability). So you cannot synthesize civilizations, because it is impossible to synthesize the fundamental values of which they are composed, or the ideas defining them. In particular, it is impossible to synthesize the Latin civilization, which is after all an organism, with any other, because all the others are mechanisms. Mixtures of civilizations are possible - as the fifth law says - but they are harmful. A mixed community such as that loses the prospect of further development of civilization. What does "facilitated inferiority", which is the sixth principle of law, mean? For Koneczny, it is a fact that lower civilizations, with less developed institutions and lacking the values of the Quincunx, and therefore less complicated internally, do not require great strength to maintain their internal cohesion, as opposed to a higher, more developed, civilization. The challenge of such civilizations therefore the former may spend more strength "outside".

The content of the final law might sound to a member of the Latin civilization like a warning bell because, when confronted with it, every other civilization uses "facilitated inferiority". Fortunately, these laws are not necessary (they do not apply to the "law of laws"), because history is not governed by necessity. Koneczny understands them as characteristic postulates, inductively derived from the history. For this reason, our historian and philosopher of history is particularly interested in the above mentioned 4 civilizations. It is in Europe, which is a ground for confrontation of the Turanian, Byzantine and Jewish civilizations, where the fate of the only complete civilization (the Latin one) will be decided.

It is easy to notice that the core of the inter-civilizational confrontation lies in Poland, or rather, that Poland could be the core. Jammed between the East and West, between the Turanian and Byzantine civilizations, it has a deeply rooted Jewish civilization within its borders. So it is up to the Polish culture to confront the three civilizations threatening the Latin world.

The problem is not only the fact that we are dealing with the expansion of three other civilizations on our land, but also in the fact that our own civilization has problems with its own cohesion. So if Poland is to fulfil its mission, and thus protect Latin Europe from its impending disaster, it must return to the objectives (these objectives are largely determined by Catholicism) of Latin civilization.

As we remember, a mixture of civilizations is poisonous, so if Latin civilization is to survive, it must get rid of alien ideas and institutions and come back to the core values by which it had been shaped.

After the breakup of the former communist world, which was initiated by Poland (or rather a section of the Poles) in 1989, so at the end of the world of bifurcated politics, certain questions of the philosophy of history, which in the second half of the 20th century was considered unfashionable, returned to theoretical discussions, with three key questions.

The first question was: what really happened and what point did humanity reach in its history? The second one was: how did it happen? And the third: what is awaiting us?

In the early summer of 1989, in the 16th issue of the American quarterly “The National Interest” an article by a previously unknown author - Francis Fukuyama – was published. It was provocatively titled ‘The End of History?’. The author made an unexpected attempt to update the Hegelian philosophy of the universal human history. Analyzing Hegel's thought through the prism of its interpretation conducted 50 years earlier by Alexander Kojève, in this essay he came to the conclusion that the end of the history announced by the author of *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* is taking place now. Therefore Hegel was not wrong, but premature. In other words, according to Fukuyama, history is (or rather was) a process of the emergence of subsequent, alternating ideas of liberty, which is coming to an end before our eyes. For Fukuyama there is only one ideology, without any alternatives, remaining on the battlefield of history. Hegel announced the end of history too hastily, because, firstly, he underestimated the liberal discourse. He simply rejected the foundation of liberalism - atomism. He was also unable to predict the ideologies that were still to arise - communism (first) and fascism (subsequently). While in the nineteenth century communism did seem like a strong competitor to liberalism, the twentieth century showed its practical and theoretical appeal in all its might. After World War I fascism emerged, simultaneously as an ideology and political practice. The world of liberal democracy started to shrink. Although fascism as an alternative to liberalism ended in the ruins of Reichskanzlei, after World War II the world under the rule of communism became substantially bigger. But here, in front of our eyes, says Fukuyama, communism is rapidly exhausting the power of its attractiveness. So for the first time in history humanity found itself in a place where there were no alternative available ideas about freedom. Only the victorious liberal democracy remained on the battlefield, “the final form of human government”.⁹ This is the end of history. This means the end of armed conflict - the very essence of liberal democratic governments excludes war as a means of resolving disputes. On the other hand, the end of history also means the end of the cultural dynamics. So an overwhelming boredom awaits us. After the end of history “there will be neither art nor philosophy, just taking care of the museum of human history.”¹⁰

Fukuyama's article made a great impression. In the next three issues of “The National Interest” many polemical articles by known authors were published. That of S. P. Huntington was possibly the most interesting, and it certainly resulted in the most significant intellectual repercussions. Huntington drew particular attention to the fact that the fundamentally philosophical thesis about the end of history can have highly alarming practical effects. A premature celebration of ‘victory’ can render the politics of the countries with liberal democracy defenceless against threats.

In the summer of 1993 Huntington published an article entitled “The Clash of Civilizations?” in “Foreign Affairs” (vol. 72, no 3). He developed his ideas and three years later they took shape in the form of a substantial book.¹¹

In the preface to that, Huntington stipulates that it is not his intention to write a scientific work in the field of social sciences. However, at its foundation there is an obvious philosophical view of history, which may sound familiar to the fans of F.

⁹ F. Fukuyama, *The End of History?*, p. 2.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

¹¹ S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996.

Koneczny: "The history of mankind is the history of civilizations."¹² Civilization is the highest stage of cultural identity. Thus a civilization is not the opposite of culture, nor is it a stage of culture, as Spengler saw it, but, as in Koneczny's view, is the culmination of cultures manifested at various levels of more or less local identities.

Although in today's world nation-states play a big role in international politics, the main boundaries along which conflicts have arisen are located between groups of countries forming different civilizations.

An affiliation with a particular civilization is decided by the fundamental cultural identity, therefore its philosophical assumptions, value systems, traditions, social relations and finally religion, which is its "central element". Thus religion is the "central element" of a civilization; it plays a major role in the process of the creation and the functioning of a civilization. Great civilizations that emerged in the history of the world usually had a great religion at their core. However, civilizations as closed cultural identities are alien to one other. This fundamental strangeness cannot be a source of inter-civilizational affinity; instead it produces reluctance, or in the worst case, hostility.

Huntington is not so much interested in history (and if he is, it is not distant history), but in the current state of world politics and its possible consequences. Before 1500 - he writes - clashes of civilizations were only sporadic, and later we had to deal with the pressure of one of them (Western) on the others. The 20th century brought a new phase in history, namely the multi-interaction phase, and in the late 20th century the politically bifurcated world of the Cold War has been replaced by a world of civilizational multi-polarity, with the primary axis of the civilizational divide running between the broadly defined East (primarily the Islamic and Chinese civilizations) and the West. Unfortunately, the civilizational powers of the West grow weaker.

"The history of every civilization comes to an end, sometimes more than once."¹³ This is not a death of an old organism, as it was for Spengler. The end of a civilization may have different causes and the time that civilizations exist may vary. What threatens the West in the face of the confrontation with the East is the gradual loss of internal identity. Thus the West has to undergo a moral revival and focus on the values fundamental for its identity: Christianity, pluralism of views and ideas, individualism and the rule of the law.

Looking at those four 20th century attempts to revive the idea of the end of history from the perspective of nearly a century (Spengler, Koneczny) and quarter-century (Fukuyama and Huntington) we can say that two of them - Spengler's and Fukuyama's - shared the fate of meteorites: they gloriously shone before fading from view. The ideas of *The Decline of the West* shone because, after the trauma of the war and the Bolshevik revolution, the West appeared to want to know that it is dying. Fukuyama's idea shone because the West wanted to know that it has emerged victorious after the fall of the Soviet Union. The first one faded because its metaphysical and organicistic foundation was indefensible. The attempt to revive Hegel's vision of history as a teleological, universal process of the development of the consciousness of freedom quickly proved to be outdated.

¹² Ibidem, p. 41.

¹³ Ibidem, s. 462.

The concepts of civilization by Koneczny and Huntington, which share some similarities, have contemporary relevance; to some extent they remain valid.¹⁴ Today, we face the clash of religious fundamentalism and nationalism with the ideas of liberal democracy.

¹⁴ Of course the relevance of Koneczny,s theory applied exclusively to the theory of civilization, and not is diagnosis of borders of conflict, which were proven wrong by the world which emerged after World War II.