Civilization: A new history of the western world
by Roger Osborne

Reviewed by Henning Viljoen
University of Johannesburg
South Africa

Civilization tells the story of the Western World (Europe and the USA) from its origins to the present. The narrative begins when modern humans came to the lands of the west around 40 000 years ago and continues up to the 20th Century where “humanity, in the heart of Europe, apparently the most civilized place on earth, had reached its lowest point”, with two World Wars and dictators such as Hitler and Stalin, and the present day globalization and confrontation between East and West.

This is not a dry historical survey of events and dates. Rather, Osborne succeeds in tying disparate topics (philosophy, politics, religion, art, literature, music, socio-economic living conditions, sociology, psychology) together into a coherent story of western civilization. It reads like a page-turning novel.

Starting the journey with the prehistory and illiterate societies of the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic periods, Osborne guides the reader to the birth of the rational mind and abstraction with the Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. He projects this development of civilization against the influence of the individual within the context of society and, more specifically, the intricate network of the extended family in the early dawn of Western civilization and the birth of human morality. According to Osborne, human morality is “arguably the single concept that marks out western society from all others that have ever existed”, in posing questions such as “What is truth?”, “What is justice?” and “What is good?"
The journey proceeds from Rome and the conquering of the barbarians by the powerful, and at times, devastating role of religion as mainly influenced by Augustine’s vision of Christianity and altered by the role of Thomas Aquinas in the establishment of Western Christendom. Touching on the various epochs of Western civilization, such as the Italian Renaissance, the Reformation, the rise of the military state with its colonization and slavery, the Enlightenment, Revolution and Industrialization and the making of modern America, Osborne has woven a narrative of extraordinary depth, scope and clarity. He confronts the reader with civilization’s glories and catastrophes of the past indicating that for every Leonardo, there is a Mussolini, for every Beethoven, Mozart and Schubert, there is a Nazi concentration camp, for every Shakespeare, there is colonial exploitation, and for every New York high rise building, there is a My Lai massacre.

In the last sections of the book Osborne masterfully shows how the *certainty* of Newtonian thinking, where mathematical formulation and quantitative measurement revealed patterns of behaviour and laws of nature, gave rise to tremendous technological development with a zeitgeist that mankind (the West) is in control of his/her universe. This modernist epoch, however, reached its abyss with postmodernist developments, where the certainty of this era of civilization was replaced by the *uncertainty principles* of modern quantum physics and the paradigms of deconstruction in philosophy, art, religion and literature. He ends the book contemplating the possible end of civilization with the advent and progress of mass culture, cyberspace communication and economic globalisation.

This book is a must for every person who wants to understand the present day world we live in.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Henning Viljoen is a retired Unisa Professor of Psychology whose field of specialisation is Personology (with special interest in Jungian psychology), Psychology of Religion and the Philosophy of Science. Since his retirement, Viljoen has been involved in postgraduate programmes at Rand Afrikaans University (now the University of Johannesburg) and has served as an external examiner at doctoral and postgraduate level for candidates at various universities.