daism as irrational. When Jews continued to cling to their religious faith and customs, modern anti-Semitism arose with a vengeance, claiming that it would never be possible for Jews to become true citizens of a modern nation-state. A similar logic of exclusion was directed at Catholics in America, and as late as 1960 it was still questioned whether loyalty to the pope would compromise a president who was a Catholic. To some extent the vague and awkward term "Judaeo-Christian" is an attempt to assert that there are fundamental agreements between Jews and Christians, overlooking the major theological disagreements as well as the history of anti-Semitism (including the Holocaust). Yet to the extent that it still excludes Muslims and others, a Eurocentric ethical system will have a questionable claim to universality; acknowledging difference in religious ethics will be a vital step in creating the conditions for a global civilization.

Start Here =>

Greek Philosophy as a Source of Ethics

Alongside the complex of Islamic religious ethics with its reliance on Qur'an and hadith there was an extensive literature on ethics and proper behavior that drew on illustrious examples from pre-Islamic societies, especially Greek philosophy. By the time the Arab empire reached its maximum extension in the ninth century, it had become a cosmopolitan civilization. Conquest of northern Africa and Spain in the west was matched by expansion in the east through Iraq, Anatolia, Persia, and the frontiers of India.

Contrary to a common modern misperception, the new Arab empire was not a religious enterprise; it was a highly efficient mechanism for conquest, in which membership in Arab tribes counted more than religious affiliation. The Arabs were not in-

terested in converting non-Muslims to Islam. Non-Muslim subjects, in lieu of military service, paid an additional tax initially modeled on the Roman and Persian taxes levied on craftsmen; therefore, conversion to Islam would have meant the loss of revenue to the state—never a popular consideration for rulers. The Arab conquerors frequently kept to themselves in separate garrison cities so they would not have to mix with the local populations, and Christian Arabs had shares in the loot of conquest alongside Muslims. When Syrians, Persians, and Egyptians began to express an interest in joining the faith of their conquerors, whether for practical or spiritual reasons, it was at first a baffling issue for Muslim authorities. Many apparently considered that Islam was basically a religion for the Arabs, comparable to Judaism as an ethnically based faith. Conversion to Islam was initially only conceivable through the mechanism of adoption into Arab tribes. In medieval empires, unlike today, ethnicity rather than religion was often a more important marker of identity. While modern writers usually write of Muslim invasions of India, medieval Indian sources only refer to ethnic groups such as Arabs, Baluchs, or Turks, frequently summing up all foreigners as barbarians; it is apparent that Indians had no sense of Islam as an organizing principle behind military incursions. It is only in comparatively recent times, under the pressure of new communal ideologies, that such different groups have been lumped together as Muslims.[5]

At the same time that an Arab Muslim society was being enriched by contact with the ancient cultures of Asia and the Mediterranean, the structure of imperial government introduced the Arabs to the lifestyles and fashions of the Roman caesar and Persian shah. Not only did the Arabs take over the existing Roman and Persian bureaucracies for the collection of agricultural and artisan taxes; they also adopted all the features of royal rule, such as coinage, court ceremony, and keeping up

with rival empires. This, of course, meant that there were major institutions in the new Arab empire that owed little to the precedents established during the lifetime of the Prophet. To address the issues faced by the new polity, it was necessary to draw upon the sophisticated civilizations of the ancient world. For ethics and politics, major sources included the animal fables of India, the powerful traditions of Persian kingship, and the philosophical heritage of the Greeks.

Soon after Baghdad was established in 762 C.E. as the capital of the caliphs (from the Arabic word *khalifa*, meaning successor to the Prophet), it played host to schools of translation and scientific research that produced Arabic versions of important Greek philosophical texts. As a result, the wisdom of Aristotle and Plato soon became part of the repertoire of educated people, including the bureaucrats who ran the empire of the caliphate. Within a couple of centuries, numerous works were available in Arabic that drew upon Greek thinking about the relationship between philosophy and religion. Aristotle's ethics was particularly popular, and it is possible to trace a continuous series of writings in Arabic (and, later, in Persian) that develop the Greek thinker's insights into the nature of morality; this philosophical literature on ethics continued to be produced, particularly in the eastern Muslim countries, right up to the dawn of the colonial period in the eighteenth century.[6] The distinctive feature of philosophical ethics was its use of reason rather than pure authority as the standard of justice and right behavior.

An example of the synthesis of Greek philosophical ethics with Islamic values is the *Jalalian Ethics*, written in Persian by the philosopher and prime minister Davani (d. 1502). A glance at his table of contents indicates how Davani integrates the Greek philosophical perspective into his outlook. The text is divided into three sections: ethics proper, economics, and politics. The section on ethics covers topics such as the purification of

character, virtues and vices, justice, and the diseases of the soul and their cures. The chapter on economics addresses primarily the concept of domestic management and discusses property, the family, eating and drinking, rights of parents, and service. Under politics, Davani begins like Aristotle with the necessity of life in cities, that is, civilization, together with the institutions of kingship. In this connection he investigates the human need for civilization, the virtues of love, the various types of city, the nature of justice, the manners of kings, the need for charity, and the classes of people, closing with extensive advice from Plato and Aristotle. While Davani frequently quotes from scripture (the Qur'an) and the prophets (particularly Muhammad), the structure of this book differs considerably from the hadith collection described above. Its organization and logic derive from the Greek tradition of ethics and politics, as mediated through centuries of reflection by Muslim thinkers. It takes the form of a "mirror for princes" addressed to a ruler, rather than being a general handbook for religious scholars.

Davani's ethics shows a fascinating interplay between the Greek philosophical tradition and the religious ethics of Islam. This combination can be seen in his extensive discussion of the virtues of the ideal ruler, particularly when it comes to demonstrating the qualities of mercy and forgiveness in time of war:

> As long as it is possible to take a prisoner alive, he should not be killed, for one can conceive of many uses for captives, such as enslavement, gift, or ransom, which can console the hearts of enemies. A Qur'anic text proclaims this: after victory, it is not permitted to kill enemies, except when it is impossible to attain security without killing them. After gaining control, one should not give expression to enmity and fanaticism, for in this situation enemies are property and subjects, and making war on one's own slaves and subjects is contrary

to the principle of justice. It is recorded in the writings of the philosophers that when Alexander, after a victory, did not spare the inhabitants of a city from the sword, Aristotle hastily wrote him a letter to this effect, that if you are excused for killing your enemies before attaining victory, after victory what excuse do you have for killing those who are in your power?

Exercising forgiveness is one of the qualities of the great kings; it brings about a tightly unified realm and solidifies the principles of pomp and magnificence. No matter how great power grows, extending forgiveness makes it more impressive and secure, for it is the means to ensure succession and to secure a glorious order. Someone has said, "If criminals knew what pleasure I take in forgiving, they would present their crimes to me as gifts." In reality, human perfection lies in "being anointed" with the divine attributes, and by reason of the saying "therefore we created them" (Qur'an 11:119), the primordial purpose for the creation of the world and humanity is the manifestation of the real existence of God. God's mercy and forgiveness bring about the splendor of divine manifestation in place of human weakness and defect. It is thus found in the hadith, that if you do not commit sin, God most high will create another group that will commit sin, so that his spontaneous mercy can manifest in the mirror of forgiveness. Therefore divine manifestation in the ornament of forgiveness can be similar to the real origin, which is the source of all good things.[7]

Exhibiting the virtue of forgiveness not only follows the advice of Greek philosophers like Aristotle but also displays one of the essential qualities of God according to the Qur'an. By demonstrating that Islamic ethics was both religious and philosophical, this text also shows how the concept of what is called Western

civilization should necessarily include Islam. That is, Muslim thinkers such as Davani clearly drew on both the heritage of Hebrew prophecy and its successors and the writings of the Greek philosophers.

In establishing the importance of Greek philosophy in Islamic civilization, we are stumbling across one of the great areas of selective amnesia about the nature of Western civilization. If one looks at any history of philosophy or history of science until very recently, the standard story began with the ancient Greeks, reached the high point with Plato and Aristotle, and then went into decline in the early Christian era. Generally one chapter provided a cursory glance at the role of the Arabs in translating Greek writings, particularly those of Aristotle. One then learns that European thinkers such as St. Thomas Aquinas first studied philosophy on the basis of these Arabic versions of Aristotle, which Jewish scholars had translated into Latin in medieval Spain. Most authorities stated that Averroes (d. 1198), the last Arab philosopher whose writings were translated into Latin, represented the death knell of philosophy among the Muslims. Yet there were major schools of philosophy in the Muslim east, particularly in Iran, where philosophers such as Mulla Sadra developed original views that included critical reflections on ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle (see fig. 4.1). In a similar way, early textbooks on the history of Islam frequently concluded that by the tenth century, "the gate of independent reasoning was closed" in all fields of Islamic religious thought, leading to an inevitable stultification and decline. Only in recent years has scholarship revealed rich traditions of innovation and ongoing development in fields such as Islamic law in many different regions.

What is most amazing about this concept of civilizational decline, aside from its inaccuracy, is the way it demonstrates a narrowly Eurocentric concept of history. Because no other works of

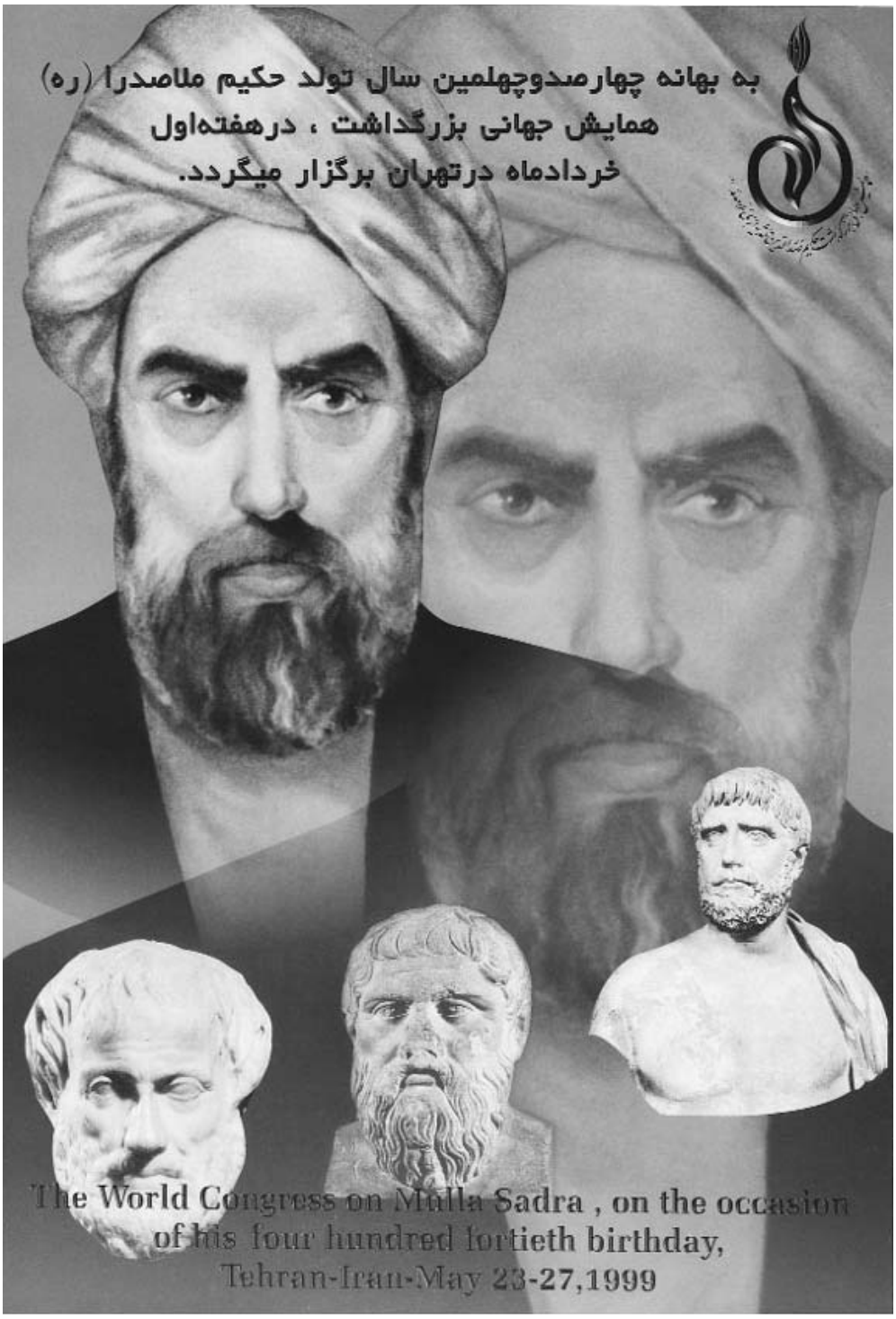

FIGURE 4.1

Poster showing the Iranian philosopher Mulla Sadra (d. 1640), arrayed over busts of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (Mulla Sadra Conference, Tehran, 1999)

philosophy were translated from Arabic into Latin after around 1200, Europeans assumed that philosophy was dead among the Arabs. This bold declaration went hand-in-hand with the doctrine that Arab civilization (and Muslim civilization in general) had gone into decline, from which it would only be saved by the arrival of European colonialism. Thus philosophy could be seen as essentially belonging to the legitimate heirs of Western civilization, that is, the western Europeans. The interest of the Arabs in philosophy was considered to be only an interlude in which they preserved philosophy, as if in an icebox, until its true owners could finally take possession during the Renaissance.

The denial of philosophy among Muslims was an argument for European superiority. Such was the contention of Ernst Renan in his surreal debate with Afghani in 1883, when he denied that Semites were capable of philosophy. European scholars actually were aware that Muslims produced philosophical writings in later times (the *Jalalian Ethics* of Davani was available in an English version in 1839), but it is rare to find any reference to this until very recently. It took the efforts of mavericks such as French scholar Henry Corbin (1903–78) to document the existence of highly sophisticated traditions of philosophy, particularly in Iran and India, in the centuries following the death of Averroes.[8] Other scholars have demonstrated that the impact of Greek thought on Islamic civilization went far beyond the limited circles of specialists who studied philosophical texts. Simply considered as a powerful system for organizing thought and logic and as a medium for debate, Greek philosophy acted as a leavening agent leading to new results in fields as varied as Arabic grammar, rhetoric, theology, and principles of jurisprudence. Greek logicians (Porphyry) and mathematicians (Euclid) continued to be part of the curriculum of study in many Muslim countries until relatively recent times. Yet somehow Islam continues to be viewed as alien to the Western heritage.

Europeans are hardly the only ones who have exercised ethnocentrism in their concepts of civilization and culture. Indians, Chinese, and Arabs have all been guilty of similar conceits in the past. But it is the modern European self-image that dominates the concept that we have all inherited of what constitutes civilization, and therefore it is the concept that needs to be examined most carefully. One only needs to glance at any American college or university department of philosophy to realize that the dominant concept of philosophy is almost entirely European, a secular product of the Enlightenment. The standard philosophy curriculum begins with the ancient Greeks and gives a brief nod to medieval Christian thinkers, but it concentrates on modern enlightened Europeans (and Americans) from the time of Descartes (d. 1650) to the present. From our modern educational curriculum, one would never guess that there are provocative and original philosophical thinkers in majority Muslim countries as well as in other parts of Asia and Africa. By defining civilization so narrowly as to include only Europeans and Americans, we relegate the rest of the world to barbarism. Yet this Eurocentric attitude can only be maintained through selective amnesia about the rest of the world.

Stop Here =>

Islamic Ethics in the Colonial Age

The age of European colonial rule was, as previously remarked, a watershed in the history of Muslim countries. How did Muslim approaches to ethics change as a result of this momentous period? One of the effects of colonial rule was the suspension of local legal systems (including any aspects of Islamic *shari'a* law) and the imposition of the law of the conqueror. In the French dominions it was the Code Napoleon, in British possessions it