I propose to survey my effort to understand human history, seeking to clarify how I got to *The Human Web* (2003) from earlier world-views proffered by teachers and then altered and elaborated by me, starting in childhood and proceeding all the way to the senility that begins to beset me today.

In the beginning was Sunday school, where kindly teachers told us Bible stories and did their best to keep us quiet, except when we sang hymns. Christian doctrine was left out: no original sin, no redeeming grace, no hell either; and heaven remained very misty. The core message boiled down to this: Jesus loved us, and we should love him in return, just as we loved and depended on our own mothers. Not much of a worldview, but all a Canadian Presbyterian Sunday school in the early 1920s felt it safe to impart.

Years of subsequent churchgoing with my parents did not expand this core very notably, so much so that I first learned about original sin and redemption by reading a translation of Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* assigned as required reading for an introductory humanities course at the University of Chicago in 1934. That course constituted a major landmark of my intellectual maturation, exposing me, as it did, to a wide variety of other eye-opening authors of the Western tradition week after week: Plato, Augustine, Luther, Voltaire, Marx, Flaubert, and many others.

**My undergraduate years**
The course was put together by Ferdinand Schevill, an elderly history professor who lectured three times a week to a class of several hundred. Schevill’s lectures had a clear and comprehensive point of view, juxtaposing reason against faith, St. Socrates against St. Paul, with clear and emphatic preference for Socrates and the human reason he stood for as the best available guide to human affairs. I already had inklings of this secular—really, eighteenth-century—viewpoint from high school, where we had used Carl Becker’s textbook for modern European history. But it was only under Schevill’s influence that what I will call the “Western Civ” model of the human past came home to me. It was a conversion experience, and I remain grateful for it inasmuch as it introduced me to the European cultural heritage in a coherent—though highly selective and superficial—fashion.

Throughout my undergraduate career, 1934–38, the University of Chicago was staffed by professors born into Christian (and some Jewish) families who had fallen away from inherited religious doctrines with varying degrees of completeness and self-consciousness. So my undergraduate years filled out details of Schevill’s secular viewpoint, but did not change fundamentals. Those years were also when the approach of World War II became increasingly obvious and I was much taken by the notion that international affairs constituted a process that overrode human wishes or conscious intentions, and that we were reenacting a pattern already familiar from ancient

**William H. McNeill is professor emeritus of history at the University of Chicago. This article was adapted from the first William H. McNeill Lecture in World History, sponsored by Berkshire Publishing Group and delivered by the author on June 26, 2009, at the World History Association Conference in Salem, Massachusetts.**

---

My college years contributed lasting assumptions I used when working out all my subsequent notions about human history

---

Leaving Western Civ Behind

WILLIAM H. MCNEILL
Greek and Roman history. A cycle of civilizational growth, crisis, and decay seemed to be at work resembling the concept of nemesis, which Herodotus used to explain Xerxes’ defeat. As an undergraduate I already planned to write an extended history of ancient and modern times, setting forth the cyclical pattern I had glimpsed.

The nearest I came to expanding my outlook beyond the European past occurred almost by chance in 1936 when I enrolled in a summer course entitled Folk Society, taught by the anthropologist Robert Redfield. He was then seeking to contract a scientific, essentially timeless, typology of human societies; and later published his views in a book entitled *The Folk Culture of Yucatan* (1941). But in 1936 he was still working his ideas out for himself, and this lent a special freshness and vivacity to his lectures.

Redfield’s basic notion was that isolated village communities could and did work out a more or less complete array of customary responses to all normal human experiences, whereas cities, where strangers abounded, could not sustain firm customary rules, thus opening the way for new forms of behavior—successful sometimes, but more often disruptive and psychologically harmful. By arranging particular communities along a scale from those almost (but never completely) encapsulated within a cake of custom to the polar opposite of a community lacking all customary forms of behavior (another impossibility), Redfield hoped to understand all that happened among actual human beings, and to be able to identify persistent points of strain within both civilized and custom-bound societies.

Incidentally, Redfield’s course also introduced me to the Plains Indians of North America and how they had altered their entire way of life by embracing new possibilities created by the spread of horses northward from Spanish Mexico decade by decade, transmitting from tribe to tribe the skills and accouterments needed for hunting buffalo on horseback. This became for me an archetype of intelligent human response to encounters with strangers who possessed some obviously superior skill or knowledge that locals could borrow and adjust to their own use. So my college years contributed lasting assumptions I used when working out all my subsequent notions about human history and how we got to where we are.

**The influence of Arnold Toynbee**

A massive intellectual jolt came my way in the spring of 1941, during my second year of graduate study at Cornell University, when I chanced upon the first three volumes of Arnold J. Toynbee’s *A Study of History*—all that had then been published of the eventual ten volumes. I discovered that Toynbee had been a generation ahead of me in glimpsing a repetitive cycle of ancient and modern European history, having reacted to World War I in much the same way as I reacted to the outbreak of World War II. Moreover, Toynbee had worked out details of classical and modern civilizational growth, crisis, and collapse far more precisely than I, and, wonder of wonder, then searched the record of other civilizations—twenty-one in all—to test whether they, too, exhibited similar rhythms of growth and decay. Not surprisingly, he found what he looked for, and with masterful ingenuity—in deed, with almost superhuman omniscience—proceeded to set forth a schema for human history as a whole.

Those volumes of Toynbee’s *A Study of History* effected a second conversion, for they showed me how parochial my studies had hitherto been. I suddenly realized that the book I had planned would have to take on the four-fifths of humankind excluded from the Western civilization with which I had previously been exclusively concerned. Though I was then within sight of the completion of my PhD, I had disconcertingly discovered that my education was just beginning, if I were ever to understand the human past as a whole.

To be sure, even in my first raptures, I recognized points of difference with Toynbee. He referred to civilization as a “state of the soul,” but I preferred to emphasize more tangible realities—technology, not least, together with social complexity, occupational specialization, and other traits anthropologists were accustomed to invoke. I was also sure that separate civilizations were never insulated and unable...
to learn from one another as Toynbee claimed, interacting only exceptionally through renaissances and what he called “aparentation and affiliation.” The Plains Indians’ reaction to Spanish horses in Mexico was enough to show me how misguided he was.

A few months later, in September 1941, when I had completed note-taking for my dissertation but before I started to write it, my Chicago draft board summoned me to join the army. Accordingly, for the next five years and two months my life altered drastically, and historical ideas and ambitions all but disappeared from my consciousness.

Then in June 1946 I was discharged from the army and returned to Cornell University to write my thesis and qualify for an academic career. A letter addressed to President Robert Maynard Hutchins, whom I had known as an undergraduate, in due course got me a job helping to construct a new “Western Civ” course for the college of the University of Chicago in 1947. The college was then experimenting with a tight-knit, comprehensive curriculum designed to turn out well-rounded citizens in four years; and twin courses, one in philosophy and one in history, were entrusted with the responsibility for bringing everything together in a culminating synthesis. But, as in 1934, only Western Civ counted as history—and its right to stand beside philosophy as a climactic experience was energetically challenged by dogmatic Aristotelians who viewed history as the lowest of the sciences, being only capable of supplying facts for scientists and philosophers to interpret.

In a sense, Hutchins’ college was a difficult, even hostile, environment for historians. But for the next seven years I and a group of twelve to fifteen others sat around a table every Friday afternoon, discussing the next week’s readings and how best to present them to our discussion groups that met three times a week. Such discussions were supplemented by a weekly lecture one or another of us delivered and thereby exposed our ideas to our colleagues’ scrutiny. In the first years, as the course took shape around a series of “topics of concentration,” we translated many readings for our own use from various languages, and

I suddenly realized that the book I had planned would have to take on the four-fifths of humankind excluded from the Western civilization with which I had previously been exclusively concerned

learned a great deal from one another in our staff discussions. So my college teaching was a stimulating experience, all the more so because we also had to articulate our claim to a place in the curriculum before the college faculty as a whole against doubters who disdained our discipline and denied our right to exist.

Nonetheless, I did not wish to confine my attention to Western Civ permanently and had not forgotten Toynbee. Thanks to my wife, whose father had been Toynbee’s closest friend at Balliol College, Oxford, I met him for the first time in my father-in-law’s house in March 1947, a week after Time magazine had devoted its cover story to his vision of rising and falling civilizations, and declared that he had fully and finally superseded Marx.

I must have made a satisfactory impression since three years later he invited me to come to London and work on what he referred to as the “Wartime Survey of International Affairs.” On the strength of funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, Toynbee was able to employ me and a staff of about a dozen others to write the survey at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, where he was director of studies. My share was to compose an 814-page book, *America, Britain and Russia: Their Cooperation and Conflict, 1941–46*, while Toynbee himself was hard at work completing the final four volumes of his massive *A Study of History*.

During those months I saw him almost every day. I was eager to find out how he wrote the *Study*, and often tried to discuss my disagreements with him. He was always courteous, even deferential, and absolutely indifferent to reconsidering anything he had set forth in the early 1920s when he had first designed *A Study of History*. Instead, he was intent on spelling out each part of his original plan, and that despite the fact that he had subsequently changed his mind, especially about religion, in reaction to intense personal crises provoked by his eldest son’s suicide and his first wife’s decision to leave him.

His rigidity disappointed me, but I did not explore the dynamic of his life and thought until long afterward when I visited England again, combed through his papers at the
Bodleian Library, and wrote *Arnold J. Toynbee: A Life* (1989). In 1950–52 I merely discovered that he wrote from notes already twenty years old—something I had no wish to replicate.

**The Rise of the West**

In 1954, when at last I began to write my big book, that precedent encouraged me to dispense with notes, since to begin with I had no way of deciding what was worth taking notes on and what to pass by. Instead, I read as widely and rapidly as possible and after six weeks or so, while memory was still fresh, sat down to write with a pile of books still at hand to consult whenever a footnote was called for, or some detail needed checking. Without that shortcut I could never have written *The Rise of the West* in a mere nine years, churning out a chapter every three months when in full career.

Those nine years were the most sustained and profitable learning experience of my life, for it was then that I made a stab a completing my education by becoming acquainted with the history of the world as a whole insofar as available scholarship made it accessible to me. New vistas opened and new relationships suggested themselves month after month, and I let my imagination run free, always seeking for contacts and stimuli extending across space and time and connecting different parts of the world.

I followed Toynbee and his predecessors by treating separate civilizations as the primary actors of world history and spent some effort in defining exactly what a civilization might be. “A style of life” appealed to me, analogous to styles of art, which art historians already treated as sensitive registers of changes in society a whole. But “styles of life” remained uncomfortably vague, and in the end I decided that what principally held civilizations together was rules of behavior and belief to which a ruling elite gave at least lip service, and to which peasants and other subordinates perforce submitted and sometimes shared in various degrees. Some centuries after the invention of writing, elite rules of behavior became directly accessible to historians in the form of divine scriptures and/or merely human classics. Whereupon, organized education transmitted (and reinterpreted) these revered texts from generation to generation, sustaining widely shared codes of conduct that made human relations more predictable, less uncertain, and less dangerous for all concerned within the borders of a given civilization.

In writing *The Rise of the West* I abandoned my earlier fascination with definite cycles of rise and fall and emphasized instead sporadic changes in transportation and communication that spread crops, ideas, techniques, and diseases from place to place within a given civilization and across civilizational borders as well.

*The Rise of the West* was also organized around the notion that from the time civilizations first arose, a primary center defined itself where innovation was most vigorous and skills became greater than elsewhere, only to be eventually surpassed by another more powerful and better organized center of civilization in due course. First was the era of Middle Eastern dominance to 500 BCE; then an era of fluctuating balance...
within Eurasia from 500 BCE to 1500 CE, when Hellenic civilization, Indian civilization, a resurgent Moslem Middle East, and then Mongol steppe conquerors succeeded one another as the principal agents of innovation. Thereafter came the rise of the West from 1500 to the present; and I projected a future era of worldwide cosmopolitanism, perhaps ruled by non-Westerners but “utilizing such originally Western traits as industrialism, science, and the public palliation of power through advocacy of one or another of the democratic political faiths” (806–7).

When The Rise of the West came out in 1963 it became a momentary best seller. It is still in print and remains central to my scholarly career, even though across the subsequent forty-six years I have become aware of many serious defects. Three of my subsequent books—Plagues and Peoples (1976), The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force and Society since A.D. 1000 (1982), and Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History (1995)—were designed to repair some of those defects, and I consider them as extended footnotes to The Rise of the West. In addition, immediately after my retirement I was invited to teach for a semester at Williams College and chose to organize a seminar in which I asked students to evaluate successive chapters of my magnum opus. They were inadequately prepared for such an assignment; but I reread the whole text for the first time since I had written it and afterward summed up my reactions in an article that has been reprinted as a preface to subsequent editions of The Rise of the West. That essay concludes by asserting “the evolution of historical concepts has arrived as a
level of sophistication that makes older efforts at world history, even one as recent as mine, seem fundamentally outmoded and obviously in need of replacement.”

**Collaboration and correction**

When I wrote those words, I did not expect to try to supersede my effort of 1954–64. But my son, John R. McNeill, had become a historian himself, specializing in environmental history; and in 1997 he invited me to collaborate with him in writing what he initially referred to as “a very short history of the whole wide world.” Among his other activities, he had been teaching African history and felt his students needed a way to situate the history of that continent within its global setting. That asked for a short book indeed. We projected 250 pages to begin with and ended with 357, which made it too long for its intended niche, but long enough to set forth the multifarious corrections *The Rise of the West* needed.

First and foremost among necessary corrections was to situate human history within earth’s ecosystem and set forth major landmarks in the coevolution of human society and other forms of life. This was my son’s principal professional endeavor, and I agreed that my former sporadic attention to this dimension of human affairs needed systematic repair. My heightened awareness of ecology dated back to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), but only in 1987 did this aspect of reality take firm hold of my mind thanks to a conference at Clark University that introduced me to a flood of recent data about the mounting rates of air and water pollution.

In the following weeks I came up with the idea that humankind existed within three perpetually interacting, unstable equilibria: one physicochemical (matter and energy), one biological (the multifarious forms of life); and one semiological (words and other forms of human communication). Moreover, it seemed to me that the least material of these equilibria—the semiotic—had an almost magical power to alter the others, acting as limits more often than as initiators of change within the system as a whole. This is an elaborate way of saying that human cultures—i.e., words and cooperation based on common understandings—were the most changeable aspect of reality and impinged on all around us, yet were themselves an unstable equilibrium like all the rest.

To be sure, for all practical purposes the detailed path of interactions among these three levels of reality remains undecipherable; and as before I continued to believe that processes acting within and across them often (but not always) overrode human purposes, leaving humans perpetually surprised and often disappointed by what actually happened. And that in turn kept the whole evolving system in motion, motivating humankind to change its behavior yet again in hope of getting what they sought. But one cannot write a book by invoking an unknowably complicated process, so this figment of my imagination comforted me without shaping our book.

It is also interesting to observe that by the time we were writing what became *The Human Web* (2003) we were aware of David Christian’s far more ambitious enterprise of writing a
single coherent history of the universe and of humankind’s career within it. His book, Maps of Time (2004) was published just a year after ours. Ever since I have likened our work to that of John the Baptist, preparing the way for the larger views and grander synthesis David Christian achieved. I came to believe that the historicization of the natural sciences set forth in Maps of Time, reducing the regularities and predictability of physics and chemistry to merely local and temporary conditions, is the central intellectual transformation of the twentieth century.

The central and most far-reaching of the corrections we presented in our little book was the proposition that human beings are, from earliest infancy, enmeshed in a web of communication that governs our consciousness and coordinates group behavior at every level. Moreover, since communication can be achieved by gesture as well as by language, and since every human group has neighbors and encounters them at least occasionally, the web of human communication has always embraced the whole of humankind, even if geographical barriers might interdict all but trifling contacts across ocean barriers for centuries and even millennia. But the fact that, unlike Darwin’s Galapagos finches, humans remained a single species even after their worldwide dispersion proves that contacts and intermingling of genes was never interrupted for long.

It follows that at least in a loose sense the human world is one and has always been so. Civilizations and less complex societies were never separate from surrounding populations, so where contiguous overland travel was possible, as it was throughout Eurasia and Africa and within the Americas, the population as a whole was what evolved rather than separate civilizations, nations, religions, or any other subgroup.

Yet divergent civilizations and less massive human societies existed and how to balance attention to each part with portrayal of the interacting whole was the most delicate and controversial issue that we faced. My son vigorously rejected my tendency to treat relations between separate regions of the Old World as “a horse race” (his phrase) for leadership or dominance over other competing centers. In large part, The Rise of the West had been built around that notion; and he thought I persisted in holding to that way of thinking, whereas in my view I now had managed to keep the whole Eurasian ecumene in view without inventing a rivalry of which, at least in early times, no one could possibly be conscious.

Adjusting the text to accommodate this difference was by far the most awkward aspect of our collaboration. We dealt with it by distinguishing a plurality of webs, existing at different levels—in local village or hunting band, in individual cities embracing differentiated occupational subgroups, each with a variant web of its own; and thinner long-distance webs uniting clusters of cities into civilizations, and civilizations into a Eurasian and an American cosmopolis until they merged into a single, and much tightened, worldwide cosmopolitan web after 1500.

Reliance on webs of communication to define how human groups affected one another and the environments in which they lived also has the virtue of emphasizing the semiotic equilibrium that I believe plays such a commanding role in provoking historical change. Our notion, in short, cuts with the grain of things, and lends (perhaps illusory) clarity and intelligibility to the otherwise overwhelming confusion of one surprise after another that has always bothered historians and ordinary people.

That presumptuous claim is more than a prudent man should make. Yet it is how I feel, content with the ideas I have borrowed from others, only to puzzle over them, misunderstand them, and strive to correct them, as I have done ever since my Sunday school days in the early 1920s.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.
The West (Western Civ) lost its story, not at the hands of the professors, but in being forced to confront the long, bloody trail of its failures. “Tragedy typically leaves questions painfully open, . . . [but] the challenge is not only how we speak without false consolation in a world like this but how we keep our culture alive to the fact that it is a world like this.” – Rowan Williams, The Tragic Imagination.

I did not expect to live in such an unusual moment. When the God of thunders and of rocky heights, The Lord of hosts, Kyrios Sabaoth, Would humble people to the quick, Allowing them to act whatever way they wished, Leaving to them conclusions, saying nothing . . . – Czeslaw Milosz, Oeconomia Divina, New and Collected Poems.