

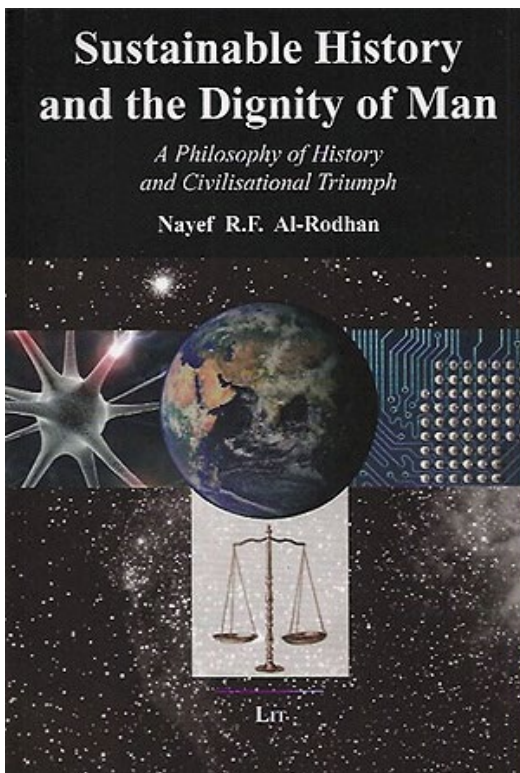


## [Sustainable History, Human Dignity and Trans-Cultural Synergy](#)

*by Nayef Al-Rodhan* Published on: 27th June 2011

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Dr Nayef Al-Rodhan outlines his theory of history about sustainable history and the dignity of man. He explains how sustainable history is propelled by good governance, which balances the tension between the attributes of human nature and human dignity needs...



***Dr Nayef Al-Rodhan\****

### **Note of the editor**

This is an edited version of the lecture presented by Dr Nayef Al-Rodhan in the Muslim Heritage Awareness Group (MHAG) meeting organized by FSTC at the Royal Society in London on the 30th of March 2011.

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I define **sustainable history** as “a durable progressive trajectory in which the quality of life on this planet or other planets is premised on the guarantee of human dignity for all at all times and under all circumstances.” In other words, Dignity is central to the Sustainability of History.

The central idea of my Philosophy of History, i.e. “Sustainable History Theory”, is that the guarantee of human dignity is a pre-requisite to the sustainability of any political order and, for that matter, the whole of human civilisation.



Dr Nayef Al-Rodhan presenting the keynote address at the MHAG meeting in London on the 30th of March 2011.

In my book entitled *Sustainable History and the Dignity of Man: A Philosophy of History and Civilisational Triumph* (see the website of the book online [here](#)), I outlined how human history is **propelled by good governance**, which balances the ever-present tension between the three **attributes of human nature** as I define them, namely *emotionality, amorality and egoisms* – and the **9 human dignity needs** as I define them: *reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation and inclusiveness*. I proposed minimum criteria for good governance that are **sensitive to local cultures and histories** but meet certain common global values to ensure maximum and sustainable moral and political cooperation. Using an **ocean model of a single collective human civilisation**, I argue that we should think in terms of a common human story that is comprised of **multiple geo-cultural domains and sub-cultures** with a history of **mutual borrowing and synergies**. I also suggest that, today, **all geo-cultural domains must succeed if humanity as a whole is to triumph**.

A good governance paradigm regardless of its form or cultural frameworks, must limit the excesses of human nature and ensure an atmosphere of happiness and productivity by promoting reason and dignity. Therefore, in my opinion, “a life governed by reason is likely to be more dignified than one

*shaped by dogma and unbridled emotions.*” What is important is that a minimum criteria of governance is met rather than the exact form of governance that a particular political system adopts. Yet, they must be appropriate, acceptable and affordable to each system and cultural domain.

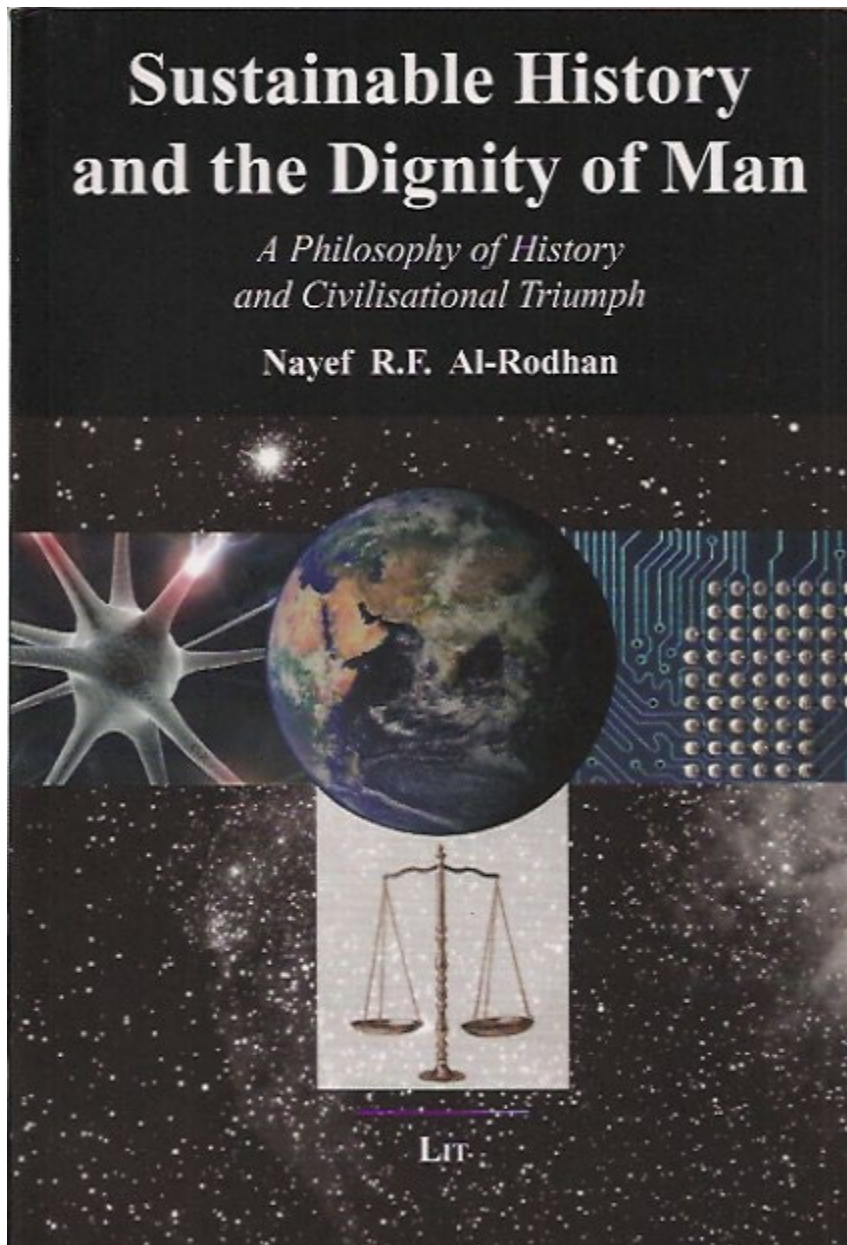
A sustainable progressive trajectory of history also depends on our “collective human triumph.” For this to occur, transcultural synergy is essential. This is because the success of any one geo-cultural domain is likely to be dependent on that of another: *I believe that today, no geo-cultural domain can excel in isolation from others.*

It is important to realise that many of the great achievements in history that are commonly attributed to one geo-cultural domain often owe a great debt to those of others. In this sense, some of the greatest achievements of human civilisation have been collective efforts and are part of the same human story. In my opinion, there is only one collective human civilisation comprised of multiple geo-cultural domains and cultures, and that the history of human civilisation is a history of mutual borrowings. The interaction of geo-cultural domains should be synergistic to maintain global harmony, and a set of global values in keeping with human nature and dignity need to be identified and developed.

Each high point in the history of human civilisation has taken place where the conditions were ripe and has borrowed and built on the achievements of other cultures whose “golden age” may have passed. Almost every golden age of geo-cultural domains has been characterised by good governance, exchanges, borrowing, innovation and the adaptation of earlier contributions to forms of knowledge and rationalism.

An important challenge in this regard is to agree on minimum criteria of good governance that are not perceived as a threat to cultural traditions and to draw on moral concepts that are indigenous to specific cultural settings. A further contemporary challenge that we face is to uncover from the dust the many examples of coexistence and cross-cultural fertilisation that represent parts of our common human heritage and history, which was marked not always by conflict but often by tolerance of diversity and mutual sharing.

For example, another look at the history of relations between the Arab-Islamic and Latin Christian worlds calls into question the notion that their relations have always been marked by blood and conquest. Conflict certainly existed, but there have also been mutually enriching exchanges that have helped to shape the world we live in today. We need therefore to engage in individual and collective efforts to salvage these more hopeful parts of our common history in order to construct a narrative that is not marked by the division between “us” and “them”, but is testimony to our capacity to coexist peacefully. This lack of historical memory about the important role of the Arab-Islamic culture in the rise of the West is partly linked to the response to the influence of the Arab-Islamic world on Medieval Europe at a time when the Arab-Islamic culture had a considerable appeal in Europe. It also occurred during the time of European identity construction.



*Front cover of Sustainable History and the Dignity of Man: A Philosophy of History and Civilisational Triumph by Nayef Al-Rodhan (Lit Verlag, 2009, Paperback: 472 pages).*

My own cursory examination of the golden age of the Arab-Islamic world suggests that good governance, a high value placed on learning, an openness to critique, toleration and respect for diversity, are vital ingredients for enabling innovation of all forms to flourish. Good governance is therefore a vital component of sustainable history.

Civilisational triumph is thus not a zero-sum enterprise that favours one geo-cultural domain over another. Civilisational triumph is also important because if it is not actively sought, conflictual relations between members of geo-cultural domains may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Justice is paramount to civilisational triumph because of its centrality to human dignity needs, the success of individual geo-cultural domains and the well-being of human civilisation. While contact and exchanges have taken place between people of different cultures for millennia, today is marked by the unprecedented intensity and scope of relations. This offers up great opportunities on a number

of levels. Historically, decisive contributions to humanity's collective knowledge have often occurred as a result of borrowing and exchanges.

Focusing purely on extremism, whether in the Arab-Islamic world or the West, will not alleviate the root causes of tensions between members of different cultures. It will only alienate those who do not recognise themselves in those stereotypes, and generate fear and misunderstanding. Cultural essentialism is, thus, intimately tied to power relations. Fixity, homogeneity and separateness are prioritised within an essentialist framework. Therefore, part of any effort to resist essentialism is recognising diversity within difference, contingency, mutability and connectedness. Considerations of justice are also integral to efforts to generate transcultural security in the first instance and, ultimately, transcultural synergy.

Another key ingredient of coexistence and successful cooperation is "trust." Therefore, a universal axiology would need to identify the common normative ideals that we have in our diverse moral languages which underpin fundamental values. This is likely to take place through communication, exploration and increased awareness of cultural and religious diversity, making dialogue as well as research, education and exchanges critical. Given that our moral codes are normative ideals, it ought to be possible to develop a global moral code on the basis of common universal values.

One means of breaking down essentialist conceptions of geocultural domains and highlighting their interconnectedness within a much broader human civilisation is to research and raise awareness of the many and varied instances of exchanges and borrowings that have taken place between different geo-cultural domains. This is important not only for diminishing cultural arrogance, but also for building greater understanding, respect and trust among members of the world's cultures. All relationships of trust and respect are premised, among other things, on reciprocity, and that includes recognition of others achievements and of our debts to them.

*It is critical to remember and to remind others that the development of human civilisation is built on foundations to which everyone has contributed.*

Security, stability and prosperity will also depend on collective security. In my previously published book *The Five dimensions of Global Security: Proposal for a Multi-sum Security Principle*, I advocated a multi-dimensional view of global security and insisted on the centrality of global justice for lasting security. One of the Five dimensions of Global Security mentioned is "*Transcultural Security*." My *Multi-sum Security Principle* states that "*in a globalized world, security can no longer be thought of as a zero-sum game involving states alone. Global security, instead, has five dimensions that include human, environmental, national, transnational, and transcultural security, and, therefore, global security and the security of any state or culture cannot be achieved without good governance at all levels that guarantees security through justice for all individuals, states, and cultures.*"

In summary, there is no reason why a clash between cultures is inevitable. If cultures are securitised and become intertwined with geopolitical interests, it is unlikely that we may experience what appears to be a clash between cultures. In some instances, ideology, identity and geopolitical issues may become entangled. Yet, differences between cultural forms do not have to constitute a cause for fear, insecurity and conflict, and the way to prevent that is through a combination of *Collective Dignity, Respect and Reason*.

## About the author

Nayef Al-Rodhan, MD, PhD, is a Senior Member of St. Antony's College, Oxford University. He is a philosopher, Neuroscientist and Geostrategist. Visit the website of his book [Sustanaible History](#). He trained initially as a Neuroscientist at Harvard and Yale Universities and later shifted to Geopolitics and Philosophy. A prize-winning scholar, he has published 17 books proposing many innovative concepts and theories in Philosophy, Global politics and Security. He has pioneered the study of the role of Neuroscience of human nature in conflict, International Relations and Civilisational Triumphalism. He is best known for his four Philosophical and Analytic works on Global politics, namely: *Sustainable History and the Dignity of Man*; *Emotional Amoral Egoism*; *Neo-Statecraft and Meta-Geopolitics*; and *Symbiotic Realism*. He has just published a new book by Palgrave on *The Politics of Emerging Strategic Technologies: Implications for Geopolitics, Human Enhancement and Human Destiny*; read its review [here](#).

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