A Yugoslav from Montenegro once taught an African from Mombasa, Kenya, at Oxford University. Among the lessons which the professor from Montenegro taught the young African was a simple proposition:

\textit{The sins of the powerful acquire some of the prestige of power.}

The Yugoslav was John Plamenatz who was at the time a distinguished fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford, and who later became a professor of political theory at Oxford.\textsuperscript{1} The student was Ali Mazrui.

In that simple proposition John Plamenatz captured the importance of power in universalizing the culture of the powerful. Even the very vices of Western culture are acquiring worldwide prestige. Muslim societies that once refrained from alcohol are now manifesting increasing alcoholism. Chinese elites are capitulating to Kentucky Fried Chicken and MacDonald hamburgers.\textsuperscript{2} And Mahatma Gandhi’s country has decided to go nuclear.

Western civilization is a pretender to the status of universal validity. Yet there are three forces that contradict that claim. One force is within the West itself. This is the force of historical relativism. What was valid in the West at the beginning of the twentieth century is not necessarily valid in the West at the beginning of the twenty-first century. If validity is changeable in the West itself from generation to generation, how can the claim to universalism be sustained?

Another challenge to the West’s claim to universalism is not historical but cross-cultural. This latter challenge is the old nemesis of cultural relativism. We may even reverse the order of the challenge to Western universalism—the cross-cultural challenge first and the historical challenge second.
Two of the organizing concepts of this essay are therefore, first, cultural relativism (differences in values between societies) and historical relativism (differences in values between historical epochs). One of our theses in this essay is that the moral distance between the West and Islam or between Africa and the West is narrower than often assumed. Another of our theses is that what are regarded as medieval aspects of African culture or Islamic culture may have been shared by Western culture in relatively recent times. In other words, the historical distance between African and Islamic values, on one side, and Western values, on the other, may not be as great as many have assumed.

But in addition to historical and cultural relativism, there is relativism in practice, or comparative empirical performance. Is Western practice at variance with Western doctrine? Indeed, are Western standards better fulfilled by other societies than by the West? In some respects, is either Africa or Islam ahead of the West by Western standards themselves? Is there a difference between the European model of Westernism, on one side, and the American model, on the other?

But let us first explore globalization before we return to the three areas of relativity—historical, cultural and empirical.

What Is Globalization?

What is “globalization?” It consists of processes which lead toward global interdependence and increasing rapidity of exchange across vast distances. The word “globalization” is itself quite new, but the actual processes toward global interdependence and exchange started centuries ago.£

Four forces have been major engines behind globalization across time. These have been religion, technology, economy, and empire. These have not necessarily acted separately, but have often reinforced each other. For example, the globalization of Christianity started with the conversion of Emperor Constantine I of Rome in 313 CE.4 The religious conversion of the head of an empire started the process under which Christianity became the dominant religion not only of Europe but also of many other societies thousands of miles from where the religion started.

The globalization of Islam began not with converting a ready-made empire, but with building an empire almost from scratch. The Umayyads and Abbasides put together bits of other people’s empires (e.g., former Byzantine Egypt and former Zoroastrian Persia) and created a whole new civilization.

Voyages of exploration were another major stage in the process of globalization. Vasco da Gama and Christopher Columbus in the fifteenth century opened up a whole new chapter in the history of globalization. Economy and empire were the major motives. There followed the migration of people symbolized by the Mayflower. The migration of the Pilgrim Fathers was in part a response to religious and economic imperatives.