Prior to the 7th century B.C., the most enlightened empires did display an awareness of the need for civility among tribal leaders. One can recognize in some of those relationships the origins of what would eventually be characterized the “comity of nations”. But there was not yet any established set of norms that were regarded as “binding” on rulers. To the extent that prehistoric regimes were constrained by norms or institutions it was by force of customs that might be said to reflect the “social nature” and “economic necessities” of the human being (Hosack, 1882). Beyond the limits of the local community, public order was achieved and maintained by coercion, bureaucratic control, and primitive legal institutions.

By the 7th century B.C., however, the march of history quickened its pace. In several cultural regions, each under the influence of its own physical environment, human development became subject to transformation on a scale not previously experienced. Simultaneously, and mostly without interaction, the building of urban society became a more ambitious enterprise. It is difficult to find an explanation for the coincidence of social transformation in the “major systems” of civilization, as they have come to be regarded. Within these systems, between 700 B.C. and 400 A.D., the basic problems of physical survival were brought under control, government became more effective, the human imagination expanded, and in some civilizations the idea of civic enlightenment found expression.

Nowhere was the escape from “survival-mode” society more dramatic than in the Mediterranean cultures of ancient Greece and Rome. There, in particular, highly developed literary traditions produced impressive exponents of civic ideals, who provided the intellectual foundations for the future development of international law, beyond the limited visions of primitive antiquity. Order was conceived as a human need, a universal necessity. It would now become possible to imagine universal order. Significantly, it was in this period that most philosophic traditions were formed, coinciding with most pan-religious organizations, hailed as the means by which the meaning of life is explained – or feared and reviled as the gathering of enemy beliefs and values.

Questions. What were the principal contributions of classical Greece and Rome to the ideals of human dignity and public order? How much did they have in common? How did they differ? Who were the first pioneers in the intellectual history of civic
benevolence, in the tower and arena of classical antiquity? Who were the early promoters of universal order? What were the civic achievements of the Chinese and Indian systems in the same era? Was there also a “classical” period in African history?

Let us turn first to Greece.

I The Greeks

The Hellenic civilization can be defined broadly. In the generous view of Arnold Toynbee (1959), it came into existence before 1,000 B.C. and continued as a single stream of influence on the world until its demise in the 7th century A.D. It was preceded by the Minoan-Mycenaean civilization, and was succeeded eventually by the Byzantine. The Mycenaean structure of government, based on kingship, was unitary, quite the opposite of the pluralistic system of independent Greek city-states that succeeded it around 1200 B.C. Although the Hellene civilization cannot be identified simply by reference to country or language, its eventual flowering took place during the period from (say) 600 B.C. to the death of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), which came shortly after the Athenians’ final, failing struggle with Philip II of Macedon and the succession of his masterful son, Alexander. By political, military and economic criteria, other periods of Hellenic history can be distinguished, but for present purposes it is the intellectual contributions of the Greeks that are given most weight. By general consent the genius of Aristotle represents the apex of Hellenic thought. With a view to locating the origins of world order, the Roman contributions deserve separate treatment, and the 3rd century B.C. will be a convenient time to gather up those colorful threads of the Mediterranean tapestry.

It is one of the many wonders of Greek classical antiquity that so many major contributions were made to the intellectual history of the world within a system of such small entities. By the 5th century B.C. perhaps only ten or twelve poleis had a population of 50,000, of which only one-fifth were Greek citizens. Only Athens and Sparta were to grow to the level of a quarter of a million inhabitants. The small minority of Greeks controlled everything. Others, including the slave caste, had few rights, although it might be supposed that their subordinate status did not deprive them of the material comforts available within the most advanced societies of the Western world (Bederman, 2001). The smallness of the government structures does not seem to have been a limiting factor. One looks rather to the vitality of the human spirit as the most likely single explanation for such a profound and lasting influence.

Questions. But what did the Greeks contribute specifically to the development of world order in the world of antiquity? How much does the international law community today owe to their famous philosophers? Before their subjugation to Alexander, did they succeed in maintaining an effective, genuinely cooperative, treaty-making system of inter-state relations? What influence did they have on the famously legalistic Romans?

Religion, Philosophy and Political Theory. The gods of classical antiquity, like their more ancient counterparts, were mirrors held up by primitive society. As noted