



## ***The Perils of Pure Secularism***

Resurgent Islam's challenge to Europe is considerable. What then is the continent's answer to the cultural pressure produced by Muslim immigration, procreation, insinuation, and intimidation?

At this point, many Westerners put their faith in secularism and believe, in Christopher Hitchens' words, that "religion poisons everything."<sup>i</sup> By their light, Islam is just another illustration of the fact that faith breeds irrationality and oppression. They maintain that, while Muslims are just the latest cause of concern, the same problems emerge whenever people of faith, whether Christian, Jew, Hindu, or Buddhist, gain strong influence in society. They reason that, if only the religionists would find their proper place of instruction at the feet of free thinkers, then temperatures would moderate and insights would multiply—no more crusades or jihads; in their place, the flowering of discussion, mutuality, and invigorating self-expression.

Fortunately, the world does not have to guess what culture cleansed of religious faith would look like. The 20<sup>th</sup> century provided stunning illustrations of this program, and the drama of secular ascendancy continues to play out in much of Europe today. So one is well-equipped to consider the cultural, economic, and political potential of strictly worldly thinking versus that of a culture infused with faith—and not just any faith. Indeed, any discussion of Europe must juxtapose the Judeo-Christian tradition in particular against the performance of its detractors.

### **The Lesson of the Kite**

Like a kite straining against its string, European philosophers, ideologues, artists, and activists have sought to break free of the Judeo-Christian tether, which has held Western Civilization aloft. They think that if they can just snap the line, then they can soar much higher, but their fate, and the fate of the society they shape, is inevitable—a plunge to earth.

The vocabulary of heedless rebellion is rich with such cautionary terms as arrogant, presumptuous, prodigal, wanton, harebrained, mulish, and pig-headed. When humanity fixates on its own wisdom and prowess, it begins to count vanity a virtue and humility before God a vice.

Rebellion against the Judeo-Christian heritage is singularly forgetful, for it is men and women of faith who have birthed and nurtured the most fruitful of cultures. These are the

people of the *Torah*, the *Summa Theologica*, the *Magna Carta*, and the *Areopagitica*. They have given the world the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, symphonic music, architectural and engineering marvels, state-of-the-art medicine, and aviation technology. They have fostered the visual arts, repulsed totalitarian regimes, and elevated the status of women. Theirs is the culture of DaVinci and Columbus, Pascal and Newton, Nightingale and Bonhoeffer, Dante and Bach, Gutenberg and Pasteur, Shakespeare and Rembrandt, Leeuwenhoek and Mendelssohn, Faraday and Tolstoy, Mendel and Bohr.

To cite these achievements and distinguished personalities is not to offer a brief for biblical theocracy, for that too would mean ruin. Genesis teaches that man is fallen and corrupt. No one authority, including the Church, is fit to rule unimpeded; checks and balances are essential for all. But without widespread respect for God's revelation of himself through the Bible as well as through Creation, man cannot sustain the system that brought forth genetics and the Geneva Accords, the automobile and chemotherapy, common law and the corporation.

As Aquinas and Augustine have demonstrated, Judeo-Christian thought appropriated the best of Greek and Roman culture to forge an unparalleled instrument of progress, one which prevails to this day. Rather than fear or resent the insights of non-believers, Jewish and Christian thinkers have followed Augustine in affirming that "all truth is God's truth." This conviction has meant religious liberty, the free play of ideas, the flowering of science and technology, an explosion of art, and both juridical and economic stability. The West has become a magnet for immigrants and a beacon for human dignity and ingenuity.

Unfortunately, a range of Western thinkers has traded in "all truth is God's truth" for something akin to "all reason (will, indulgence, creativity) is good reason (will, indulgence, creativity)." Overestimating the value of their personal insights and projects, they have torn free from the "bonds" of revelation and fallen into a death spiral of intellectual and artistic willfulness.

They have begun with good things, gifts from God, whether reason, perception, volition, imagination, innovation, or satisfaction. But they have made these capacities little gods, and so they have lost their way. When not checked by biblically informed common sense, man has a tendency to exaggerate and dominate. He becomes master of half truths, confused priorities, and over-extended enthusiasms.

Make no mistake. The Judeo-Christian tether is not a strait jacket. Anchored kites are infinitely colorful, variously-configured, and quite mobile. As God-haunted artists such as Rembrandt, Rouault, Van Gogh, Durer, and Chagall have shown us, the human spirit can soar when grounded in theism. Experience also teaches us that though the string may be cut, the kite may dance about in the sky for a season. Just as there are cut-flower civilizations, which keep their bloom for a moment, there are cut-kite civilizations which manage to stay aloft for awhile. But absent the tension that enables them to take flight in the first place, they are destined to fall.

That being said, consider, briefly, the following trajectories:

## **Deduction**

The ability to reason is certainly a gift from God, and the rules of logic, of deduction, are impressive. For one thing, they keep men from contradicting themselves and thus insure a modicum of rationality. Of course, there are many other resources for systematic thinkers, but whatever the virtues of the syllogism, the propositional calculus, or modal logic, formal systems are susceptible to the principle, “garbage in, garbage out.” Chains of reasoning are only as good as the truth of their premises and the worth of their basic terms. Start with the wrong concepts and assumptions, and you will go awry.

The Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) is a case in point. As a “free” thinker, he was excommunicated from his Amsterdam synagogue for denying the truth of God’s Word. Employing a fantastical notion of “substance,” Spinoza argued for pantheism, the position that all is God and God is all. Not surprisingly, he is now a darling of environmental extremists who consider rivers, microbes, dolphins, and men to be equally “divine.” And when People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) call holiday meals “Holocaust on a Plate,”<sup>ii</sup> comparing the residents of Auschwitz to geese, turkeys, and Cornish hens, they show how far and how badly the mind can go when it is detached from the counsel of God. Spinoza would not have approved of PETA’s ad campaign, but he certainly did his part to enable it.

## **Induction**

The Lord has blessed man with a wonderful range of auditory, visual, tactual, gustatory, and olfactory experiences. Not surprisingly, British philosophers, such as believers John Locke and George Berkeley, turned to the concreteness of sense perception to counteract the “non-sense” of abstract thinkers such as Spinoza. In contrast, the empiricists insisted that claims must be “cashed in” experientially and that man’s power of induction, of drawing conclusions from sensory observation, was the measure of all things. Such was to be the rule for all human discourse, and not just science.

But the senses as well as the intellect have their limits and failings, as empiricist philosopher David Hume soon demonstrated. When one limits himself to the analysis of what he perceives directly, some very important matters, including the endurance of the soul and the goodness (indeed, the very existence) of God, become mired in skepticism.

Yes, the Judeo-Christian scriptures honor the senses through the use of concrete examples (including parables), nature Psalms, and the practical wisdom of Proverbs. But when sense experience and experimentation are cut off from the tug of spiritual grounding, they crash.

Today Hume’s disciples relish his rejection of religious faith and his insistence that sense experience is the only guide to truth. This is the party of Bertrand Russell, A. J. Ayer, and Richard Dawkins. They have done their utmost to fit men with moral and metaphysical

blindness, insisting that humankind's power of observation and induction is sufficient for decent living.

In drawing their supposedly empirical conclusions, they have come to the "liberated" notion that traditional marriage is stifling, and so they have attempted to lay an ax to the nuclear family, the root of civilization itself. Whether counseling, excusing, or practicing promiscuity, these men have shown what destructive foolishness results when people treat their apprehension of sights and sounds, pleasures and pains, as the beginning and end of wisdom.

## **The Will**

While the British empiricists were most impressed with what experience wrote on man's consciousness, the German idealists were impatient with Locke's notion that the mind began as a blank slate (*tabula rasa*). Instead, starting with Immanuel Kant, they argued that the mind was a powerful engineer, shaping, pre-consciously, the world itself—or at least the world of human experience. On his model, there was something beyond man's immediate apprehension, but who could really say what it was? Yes, there were edifying hints of God's existence, of human freedom and immortality, but there was no warrant to get specific or dogmatic about such things.

Those who followed Kant were much impressed with his "willful" (rather than passive) mind, and they progressively elevated the will to the place of highest prominence. Extending this notion were Johann Gottlieb Fichte (with the ego projecting the whole world), Arthur Schopenhauer (with desires running roughshod over rationality), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (with history itself driven by an evolving world-mind or spirit), and Friedrich Nietzsche (who proclaimed the intimidating "Superman," who scorned conventions).

Ultimately, this tradition served to inspire Karl Marx (who embraced Hegel's notion of inevitable progress-through-conflict) and Adolph Hitler (with his Aryan dreams, reflected in Leni Riefenstahl's film tribute to the Reich, *Triumph of the Will*). But the glorification of will was not limited to Germany. France picked up the theme in both existentialism and postmodernism. In the former case, Jean-Paul Sartre coined the expression, "Existence precedes essence," that is to say, the only nature man has is the one he forges for himself (and not the one God gave him). Later, the French deconstructionist Michel Foucault cast all argumentation as a power play, untouched by truth, which is itself an illusion.

In short, the unfettered will has a tendency to trample human dignity. In its march toward greater power, it forgets the canons of civility and grows increasingly impatient with those not willing or able to keep pace. Amiability gives way to disgust and charity to contempt. In the end, one has the Third Reich's Treblinka and the Soviet Gulag, as well as the hell of ordinary human contact from which there is, in Sartre's terms, "no exit."

## Indulgence

Clearly, humans are endowed with healthy impulses and instincts, whether self-preservation, sexual attraction, curiosity, or community. But when impulse is given sacred status and when anything which would frustrate acting on impulse is condemned, man is headed for ruin.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is famous for enthroning spontaneity and wantonness. Convinced that whatever “noble savages” wanted to do was admirable and that institutions which frustrated self-expression were deadening, he helped unleash all sorts of self-destructive and socially calamitous behavior. What he totally ignored was the fallen nature of man, man’s need for correctives and moral restraints. For mixed in amongst the healthy impulses are perverse ones such as gluttony and promiscuity.

Sigmund Freud stimulated such thinking by “helping” men and women cast off “repression.” To do so, he realized that he would have to deny sexuality’s grounding in God’s creation, so he wrote *The Future of an Illusion* to put belief in God in its “pathetic” place.

On into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, philosophers and artists came to adore profligacy. In England, the Bloomsbury Group delighted in mocking Victorian values. In France, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Cocteau, and Pablo Picasso were enamored with the criminal writer Jean Genet. With their help, this thug achieved legendary status with his unbridled, menacing, and licentious approach to life.

With the 1960s came the mantra, “Sex, Drugs, and Rock ‘n’ Roll,” wherewith a generation learned to celebrate whatever would “get them through the night.” According to their music, the Rolling Stones wanted nothing so much as “satisfaction” and desired that there be more “sympathy for the devil.” This was the age when the London Symphony Orchestra, the Vienna Boys Choir, and the Trapp Family Singers got lost in the noise coming from Johnny Rotten and the Sex Pistols, the Kinks, and the Dead Kennedys.

Unfortunately, the children of the indulgence-driven 60s have not proven particularly gifted at forming and growing families. They and their children have been party to cultural suicide, whereby Europe is contraceiving, aborting, and infecting itself into oblivion.

## Creativity

The second word of the Bible is *bara*, “created.” Creativity is characteristic of God and of those made in his image. While he creates *ex nihilo*, we must work with the materials already set before us, but there is a great universe of possibilities in this connection. Man as the fashioner, *homo faber*, is a worthy being, but when creativity becomes novelty-for-novelty’s-sake, then the arts fare badly. Artists and thinkers substitute the-shock-of-the-new for the-shock-of-the-truth. No longer is there loyalty to things that are “true, noble,

right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy” (to use Paul’s language in Philippians 4). Instead, there is fascination, acclaim, and commercial advantage in the pointlessly provocative, the curious, and the as-yet-unseen, no matter how degrading or vacuous.

Careers have been built on art which is pointlessly vile, absurd, and yes, artless. The paradigm of such activity (or inactivity) is Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*. Here, he simply appropriated a urinal, wrote “R. Mutt” on it, and submitted it to a show. Though initially marginalized, it has become one of the world’s most celebrated pieces of contemporary art.

Whereas art was once judged in terms of line, mass, color, proportion, and balance—properties of the work itself—value shifted to the whims of the “Artworld,” the community of intellectuals, bohemians, fashionistas, and dilettantes, whose tastes and investment strategies were increasingly bizarre, incestuous, and ironic. Styling themselves as cognoscenti, they patronized nihilists and slanderers devoted to pretentious and asinine works. Two among many cases in point are Damien Hurst’s dead sheep in formaldehyde (*Away from the Flock*) and Balthus’s pedophilic *Therese Dreaming*. In this universe, the more vexatious, the more amoral or puzzling, the better. And artists were all too ready to pose as philosophers, but without the heavy lifting of propositional clarity and principled reason.

## **Endemic Recklessness**

In sector after sector, modern man has pushed legitimate concerns to illegitimate extremes—order to fascism; fitness to eugenics; self-respect to narcissism; civility to cultural relativism; sensitivity to speech codes; dissent to anarchy; commerce to materialism. Secularists have flown from liberty to license to absurdity to abuse.

Aesthetic sensitivities have become so enthroned above morality that avant-garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen felt free to celebrate destruction of the World Trade Center on 9/11, calling it “the greatest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos.”<sup>iii</sup> At every turn, cultural leaders in the West have chosen to ignore the counsel of prudence, decency, and piety, and the result has been pervasive hedonism, tribalism, and apathy. Defenses are down, and histories are forgotten. Standards have slipped and barbarism is ascendant. Rigorous debate has given way to sophisticated sound bytes. Disciplined achievement and personal responsibility have been denigrated by a therapeutic culture of aggrieved victimhood.

## **Whither Charity?**

Throughout the West, one finds the fruit of Judeo-Christian compassion—a German Lutheran hospital in Israel, a Jewish orphanage in the Netherlands, a Salvation Army rescue mission in England, Habitat for Humanity homebuilders in Romania, and Special Olympics teams across the continent. All these originated in communities of faith.

Where are the great atheist hospitals, adoption services, disaster relief teams, and inner-city health clinics? Where is the skeptic's Red Cross? Can Europe possibly count on the growing community of agnostics, libertines, shirkers, egotists, and careerists to found and sustain the great works of mercy characteristic of devout Catholics, Jews, and Protestants? Can London expect a Richard Dawkins Hospital to take its place alongside others named for Saints Bartholomew, Mary, and Pancras? Can Parisians look for a Voltaire Clinic or a Derrida Orphanage? And where is Germany's Nietzsche Camp for Children with Disabilities or the Schopenhauer Food Pantry?

### **Whither the Family?**

And what of the family, the very foundation of society? In this connection, a roll call of modern cultural icons should send a chill down the spine. For theirs is a record of shameless, crusading infidelity, of abandoned children and heartbroken spouses. These ideologues have inspired a culture of contraception and abortion—and an aversion to wedlock. Study, for instance, the sexual, marital, and parental track records of such shapers of the modern mind as Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Pablo Picasso, Bertrand Russell, Walter Gropius, Martin Heidegger, Simone de Beauvoir, James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, and A. J. Ayer.

Yes, of course, secularists can have strong families and theists can fall into adultery, divorce, and child abuse. But the Judeo-Christian center of mass is far more family-friendly than that of the irreligious.

### **Whither Community?**

The English common law tradition is a paradigm of social healthfulness. Developed over centuries of moral and political engagement, it is both *common* and *law*. That is to say, it is grounded in the legitimate concerns of the populace, and it is recognized as binding across the land. It is the product of centuries of give and take in a nation whose religious orientation has been upon Jerusalem—not Mecca, Lhasa, or Varanasi.

Its judicial standards have been tempered by the courts of equity, wherein devout chancellors stood up for the weak. It has drawn on the Decalogue, the Sermon on the Mount, and the notion of God-given conscience. It reveres precedent, due process, equality before the law, and juries of one's peers. It is tried and true, and much copied in the world, respected by believers and non-believers alike.

How then can a Western people grant dispensations for an alien, cleric-driven, form of law—shari'a—which despises key tenets of Western jurisprudence, substituting sectarianism for community, regional theocracy for universal democracy. Of course, one marvels at Muslim contempt for the Judeo-Christian traditions. After all, these traditions form the basis for the very societies to which they have fled from the squalor and strife of their homelands. But more perplexing is the West's apology and disregard for those very

traditions, which have made their cities magnets for Muslim immigrants weary of the backwardness, corruption, violence, and poverty of the districts from which they came.

The explanation can only be the exhaustion of traditional convictions, whereby a people comes to doubt the very principles which made their civilization great. Such collapse does not come quickly but is the result of centuries of ridicule by those who both worship their own cleverness and hate the counsel of God. Whereas Western missionaries once condemned polygamy in the Middle East, widow-burning in India, and foot-binding in China, priests of the new secular culture hold their tongues in the face of religious and irreligious perversities lest they violate the canons of multiculturalism.

## A Vacuum

As intimidating as the growth of Islam in Europe may be, the ultimate threat is not the Muslim neighbor but the spiritual and cultural vacuum into which he has moved. Secularism, naturalism, and materialism simply cannot sustain civilization, a fact that becomes increasingly clear with each passing decade. One sees not so much the clash of civilizations as the collapse of Western civilization at the very moment it faces vast challenges from the uncivilized program of Muslim hegemony. And so a heritage must be revitalized, old truths restated, and old standards reset. Otherwise, the tide that was repulsed militarily at Tours in 732 and Vienna in 1683 will flow, with scant hindrance, throughout Europe. What Muslims failed to take through force of arms will be gained through demographics, hysterics, and politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 13.

<sup>ii</sup> See "Grandson of Celebrated Jewish Author Brings Giant Graphic Display to Show How Today's Victims Languish in Nazi-Style Concentration Camps," *PETA Website*, October 9, 2003, <http://www.peta.org/mc/NewsItem.asp?id=3021> (accessed June 13, 2008).

<sup>iii</sup> Anthony Tommasini, "Music; The Devil Made Him Do It," *New York Times Website*, September 30, 2001, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B05E2D8123AF933A0575AC0A9679C8B63&scp=2&sq=the+greatest+work+of+art+that+is+possible+in+the+whole+cosmos&st=nyt> (accessed June 13, 2008).