

James Kurth

## Western Civilization, Our Tradition

Half a century ago, Western civilization was a central idea, and ideal, in American political and intellectual discourse. American political leaders frequently said that the United States was the heir to Western civilization and that it had a duty to defend the West against its enemies, most obviously the communist bloc led by the Soviet Union (sometimes termed “the East”). American academic leaders regarded the Western tradition with respect, and courses on Western civilization were widely taught and often required in American universities. The 1950s were an era when the leading institutions of America (and with their support and guidance, the leading institutions of Europe as well) were confident and articulate in identifying with and promoting the Western tradition.

Today, Western civilization is almost never mentioned, much less promoted, in political and intellectual discourse, either in America or in Europe. When it is mentioned amongst Western elites, the traditions of the West are almost always an object of criticism or contempt. Instead, real discussion of Western civilization is usually undertaken by the political, intellectual, and religious leaders of *non-Western* societies—most obviously, Muslim societies. Indeed, the idea of the West seems to be most charged with vital energy in the excited mind of our civilization’s principle contemporary enemy, radical Islam. The most

lively consciousness of the West actually seems to be found within the East. But within the West itself (i.e. the United States, Europe, and also Canada, Australia, and New Zealand)<sup>1</sup> it sometimes seems that the Western civilization of fifty years ago has become a lost civilization today.

What explains this great transformation in a great civilization? Which of the West’s traditions remains a living reality today? And what might be the fate of these traditions in the future?

### The Three Traditions of Western Civilization

Among scholarly interpreters of the West, it has been widely understood that Western civilization was formed from three distinct traditions: (1) the classical culture of Greece and Rome; (2) the Christian religion, particularly Western Christianity; and (3) the Enlightenment of the modern era.<sup>2</sup> Although many interpreters have seen Western civilization as a synthesis of all three traditions, others have emphasized the conflicts among these threads. As we shall see, the conflict between the Christian religion and the Enlightenment has been, and remains, especially consequential.

The first of the Western traditions was

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classical culture. In the realm of politics, for example, Greece contributed the idea of a republic, while Rome contributed that of an empire. Similarly, Greece contributed the idea of liberty, and Rome, that of law. When combined, these ideas gave rise to the important Western concept of *liberty under law*.

Christianity shaped Western civilization in many important ways. Christian theology established the sanctity of the individual believer and called for obedience to an authority (Christ) higher than any secular ruler (Caesar), ideas that further refined and supported the concept of liberty under law. Christian institutions, particularly the papacy of the Roman Catholic Church in its ongoing struggle with the Holy Roman Emperor and local monarchs, bequeathed to the West the idea of a separation, and therefore a limitation, of powers.

The third source of Western civilization was the modern Enlightenment, which provided the ideas of liberal democracy, the free market, and the belief in reason and science as the privileged means for making sense of the world. More particularly, Britain's "Glorious" Revolution of 1688 emphasized liberty and constitutionalism, while the French Revolution of 1789 emphasized democracy and rationalism. The differences between the Enlightenment in Britain and on the Continent would give rise to important divisions within the West during much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This was the case with regard to the Industrial Revolution and the different responses to it: both state guidance of the economy and Marxist ideology played a much greater role on the Continent than in Britain or the United States.

### **From Christendom to Western Civilization**

The very term "Western civilization" is

something of an anomaly. It was invented only a century ago, and it is not really comparable to the terms commonly used for other civilizations. Most other civilizations (e.g., Islamic civilization, Hindu civilization, and Orthodox civilization)<sup>3</sup> have retained a *religious* identification; and indeed, before the Enlightenment the term that people in the West commonly used for their civilization was "Christendom." The story of how "Christendom" became "Western civilization" is significant for understanding the changing nature of our civilization, and perhaps its fate.<sup>4</sup>

The Enlightenment brought about the secularization of most of the intellectual elite of Christendom. This elite ensured that their civilization was no longer called that, even though much of its ordinary population remained Christian. The French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution spread Enlightenment ideas to important parts of that population, but the Christian churches continued to be a vital force within the civilization. Ever since the Enlightenment, however, it has not been possible to refer to our civilization as Christendom.

For about a century, the preferred term for our civilization was "Europe." But this was also the period that saw the rise of European settlements in the New World moving to the status of independent nations. This made the term "European civilization" unsuitable. In the early twentieth century, a few Europeans conceived of a new and more appropriate term: "Western civilization." Almost as soon as it was invented, however, the term began to be used in the pessimistic context of civilizational decline, notably in Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918). Had the term been left to Europeans alone, it would probably have had a short and unhappy life, particularly given the devastating moral, as well as material, consequences of the First World War.

### **The American Redefinition of Western Civilization**

It was the New World that was called in to redress the pessimism of the Old. The Americans breathed a new meaning into the concept of Western civilization, first as they dealt with the great surge of European immigrants to America, and then as they dealt with the European nations in Europe itself in the course of the two world wars. For Americans in the first decades of the twentieth century, Western civilization consisted principally in the ideas of liberty and individualism, institutionalized in liberal democracy, free markets, constitutionalism, and the rule of law. Americans referred to this ensemble of ideas as “the American creed,” and they promoted this creed as a principal means to “Americanize” new immigrants from Europe. These ideas were, of course, direct descendents of the British Enlightenment, but they were also indirect descendents of elements in the classical and the Christian traditions as well.

The American intervention on the side of the Western Allies in the First World War and again in the Second World War brought about a redefinition of Western civilization. The new conception has been described as “the Allied scheme of history,”<sup>5</sup> but its central pillar was the peculiarly American sense of historical mission. The new content of Western civilization became the American creed. Conversely, the new context for the American creed became Western civilization as a whole. The combination of American energy and European legacy gave the idea of Western civilization both power and legitimacy in both America and Europe. The power helped the United States win the First World War against the German Empire, the Second World War against Nazi Germany, and the Cold War against the Soviet Union. The legitimacy

helped to order the long peace within Western Europe that was very much intertwined with the Cold War. With its appropriation by America, therefore, the idea of Western civilization experienced its heroic age.

### **The Cold War Concept of Western Civilization**

The Cold War clarified and crystallized the political and intellectual division between the West and the East. The “Allied scheme of history,” the product of the two world wars, was elaborated and institutionalized into what we might call the “NATO scheme of history,” which fit nicely with the Cold War. Almost all of the members of the North Atlantic Alliance appeared to be heirs of each of the three great Western traditions, and they seemed to be comfortable and confident in this identity and role.<sup>6</sup> (NATO did include a couple of cultural anomalies—Greece and Turkey—which were obviously outside some of the elements of the three traditions, and the United States did have another, immensely important ally—Japan—which was obviously outside all three traditions, as well as outside any plausible geographical definition of the West. But these anomalies became acceptable with the argument that each of these countries was now engaged in the grand project of “Westernization.”)

During the first decade of the Cold War, the struggle between the West and the East took the form of a struggle between “the Free World” and “the Socialist World,” as the two antagonists referred to themselves. With the de-colonization of the European empires, a new region, the global South, emerged “between” the West and the East, and now the struggle was said to be between the First World and the Second World for the future of the Third World. Both the West and the East offered the South a particular version of the Enlightenment project,

a particular secular doctrine of progress. The West promoted liberalism, which was largely a product of the British Enlightenment, while the East promoted Marxism, which was largely a product of the French Enlightenment. Significantly, however, the West decided that in its struggle with the East it could not promote to the South the other Western traditions, classical culture and the Christian religion.

The 1950s, the high Cold War, was the golden age of the Allied or NATO conception of Western civilization. With the 1960s, not only this conception but any conception of Western civilization came under sustained assault, and the Western traditions have been on the defensive ever since. Indeed, by now, even “defensive” may be too strong a term, since today very few defenders of Western civilization can be found within the political, intellectual, and economic institutions of either America or Europe.

What were the causes of this great rejection of the great traditions? We will begin with the rejection of the classical one, which even in the seeming golden age was the most vulnerable of the three traditions.

### The Death of the Classical Tradition

The classical tradition was still taught to some extent in American and European universities in the 1950s. But deep within this classical education was a problematic assumption—that this tradition was relevant, even practical (at least as “practical wisdom”), for a particular part of society. This was the elite who would become the governors, administrators, and judges of the rest, the mass, of society. The classical tradition valued aristocracy and hierarchy, honor and duty. (The ideal career for the student of the classical tradition during the modern age was to become a colonial administrator, such as the legendary young men who went out from Oxford and Cam-

bridge to become district officers of the British Empire in India.)

Antithetical to the classical spirit are both the democratic spirit and the commercial spirit, spirits which were greatly strengthened by the Enlightenment. They were, of course, especially prevalent in the United States. Whatever might be made of “classi-



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cal republican” ideas at the time of the American founding, by the 1830s most of America was thoroughly democratic and commercial in its spirit, as Tocqueville famously observed in his masterpiece, *Democracy in America*.<sup>7</sup> Although the America of the 1950s was the leader of the West during something of a golden age of self-consciousness about Western civilization, the classical tradition was by that time almost wholly invisible in almost every aspect of American life. This meant that there would be no substantial interest to defend that tradition if it were ever subject to a substantial assault. And this assault did come as early as the 1960s.

The classical culture of Greece and Rome, so integral to both Western civilization and to the quite different civilization shaped by Eastern Orthodoxy, formed no part of the history of most other cultures or civilizations. It meant almost nothing to the peoples of Asia or Africa, or even to the Indian and

Mestizo peoples of Latin America. But the United States had living within its borders many descendents of these non-Western peoples, and it would come to have vastly more as a result of the Immigration Act of 1965. The political and intellectual leaders of these groups saw classical culture (and even the broader Western culture) as a device by which the traditional elite excluded them from equal participation and respect within what should be a democratic society. With regard to the classical culture, therefore, the American civil-rights movement became an uncivil wrecking operation. At the same time, the anti-colonial movement performed a similar operation for Europe.

The political and economic elites of America, and also those of Europe, who were now following American leadership in many ways—imbued as they were with the democratic and the commercial spirit—had already ceased to believe in the classical tradition, since it was so remote from the actuality of their lives and livelihoods. Now, in order to maintain their political and economic positions in the face of the civil-rights and anti-colonial movements, they were quick to appease these anti-Western forces by abandoning the last remnants of the classical tradition. This meant expelling the classics from their last redoubt in the higher educational institutions of the West. In effect, this marked the death of the classical tradition within Western civilization.

### **The Ordeal of the Christian Tradition**

The Christian tradition also came under systematic and sustained assault in the 1960s, and the Enlightenment was at the intellectual and ideological center of the assault. The Enlightenment had always believed in reason and science as the privileged means of making sense of the world. Driven by pride, many of the Enlightenment's adherents were possessed by an animus to over-

throw all traditional authority, both secular and religious—and to appropriate all authority for themselves. This drove them to use reason and science in a biased way to deny any Biblical and spiritual basis for truth and therefore to denigrate the Christian religion.

This animus had existed in the Enlight-



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enment tradition since its origin. However, in the 1960s there was a massive expansion in the number of students in secular universities, and also a massive expansion of popular (actually pagan) culture promulgated by the secular media. The Enlightenment mentality had penetrated much of the elite at the beginning of the industrial age. Now, at the beginning of the information age, it expanded its dominion over much of the young in the mass. These intellectual and cultural developments were reinforced by developments in technology (the sudden availability of new contraceptive methods) and in the economy (the sudden entry of large numbers of women into the new full-time jobs produced by the information economy). These, in turn, resulted in a momentous political development: the rise of a powerful feminist movement and, when contraceptive technologies proved insufficient, its promotion of abortion as its central project.

Each of these developments, which surged in the 1960s and which continue

today, contradicted some teaching or practice of the Christian religion. Overall, Western elites have justified and legitimated them as the progressive fulfillment of Enlightenment ideas such as the liberty and equality of the individual. Seen from a Biblical perspective, however, they are really just new manifestations of the ancient forces of pride and rebellion.

The assault on the Christian religion has been institutionalized by changes, in the 1960s and afterwards, in the ethnic structure of both America and Europe. In the United States, a series of Supreme Court decisions erected a massive (and radically new) wall between church and state, in effect driving Christianity from the public square. This development was related to the collapse of the Protestant (“WASP”) ascendancy in the American intellectual and legal elites. In Europe, large-scale immigration from Muslim countries began in the 1960s and has continued ever since. The consequence has been the establishment of large Muslim communities, which now comprise five to ten percent of the population of many European countries. This amplifies the preference of European political elites to drive Christianity from the public square.

Although the forces assaulting the Christian tradition have operated throughout the West, the effects have been different in Europe and America. In Europe, the Christian churches had been bound up with the traditional political and social authorities. As these authorities declined with the spread of liberal democracy and free markets—the working out of the democratic and the commercial spirits—the Christian churches declined along with them. In contrast, in America the large number of different “denominations” (a distinctively American term), which were independent of the state and independent of each other, meant that almost from the origins of the United States

there was a kind of religious democracy and religious market. If a particular church seemed to be bound up with a discredited and declining political or social authority, Christians in America could easily move to a new church, while keeping faith with the essentials of the Christian religion. This helps to explain why today Christianity is much more vital in America than it is in Europe. American elites may have rejected it, but the Christian religion is meaningful and centrally important to large sections of the American population. Thus, the Christian thread continues to have civilizational importance in America.

### **The Dominance of the Enlightenment Tradition**

Today, the only Western tradition embraced by the political, intellectual, and economic elites of the West is that of the Enlightenment. For American political and economic elites, this largely means the British (or Anglo-American) Enlightenment, with its emphasis on the liberty of individuals, institutionalized in liberal democracy and free markets. For European political, intellectual, and economic elites (and for the American intellectual elite located in academia and the media), this largely means the French (or Continental) Enlightenment, with its emphasis on the rationalism of elites, institutionalized in bureaucratic authority and the credentialed society. Together, these elites promote the contemporary version of the Enlightenment project. They are intent upon imposing it around the world—and upon eliminating any vestige of the other Western traditions, the classical and the Christian, within America and Europe themselves.

The rejection of the Christian faith by Western elites does not mean that they have rejected all faiths. Despite the claims and conceits of rationalists and scientists, every

human being believes in some things that cannot be proven (and therefore cannot be established by reason) or that cannot be seen (and therefore cannot be established by science) and that therefore have to be taken on faith. Ever since the coming of the Enlightenment, Western elites have adhered to a variety of secularist and universalist faiths, which in effect have been religions without God.

Kenneth Minogue has identified these ersatz faiths as (1) the idea of progress, (2) Marxism, and (3) "Olympianism," which is the contemporary belief that an enlightened intellectual elite can and should bring about "human betterment...on a global scale by forcing the peoples of the world into a single community based on the universal enjoyment of appropriate human rights."<sup>8</sup> As Minogue demonstrates, each of these secular religions has identified Christianity as its enemy. Indeed, the Olympianism which dominates in our time sees the very idea of Western civilization itself to be an obstacle to its grand global and universalist project.

The universalist ideology of Olympian elites is largely consistent with, and perhaps reflective of, the expanding interests of global corporations. During the first half of the Cold War, American corporations had found their most attractive business opportunities in Europe or other Western countries. This more or less corresponded to some definition of the American alliance system and of Western civilization. During the second half of the Cold War, however, American multinational corporations expanded into non-Western regions. Finally, with the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the end of the Cold War, the preferred arena for American multinational corporations became the entire world, the great globe itself: hence, "globalization." For multinational, now global, corporations, it became important to be identified with ideas and

ideals that appeared to be progressive and global, even inevitable and universal, and not to be identified with ideas and ideals that were (merely) Western and traditional.

The result of these ideological and economic developments has been the redefinition of the ideal economic arena from Western to global, of the ideal society from Western to multicultural, and of the ideal political system from Western constitutionalism to the "rule" of transnational NGOs. Instead of Western civilization, there is supposed to be a global civilization, in which multicultural and transnational elites will administer (or impose) their notions of human rights. What is envisioned is a universal empire—except that it will be called global "governance"—and a universal religion—except that it will be called universal human rights.

### **From the Enlightenment Tradition to Post-Western Civilization**

Historians usually date the beginning of the modern era to the end of the fifteenth century; the Italian Renaissance and the European explorations of the non-European world were major movements that inaugurated and shaped the new era. These were soon followed by other developments, such as the Reformation and the scientific exploration of the natural world. The post-modern era seems to have begun about the end of the twentieth century, making the modern era just about half a millennium in length.

Clearly, the modern era can also be seen as the Western era. All of the great movements which defined the modern era originated in Europe, and Europeans then spread them, even imposed them, over the rest of the globe. Similarly, the post-modern era can also be seen as the post-Western era, with most of the Western traditions not only rejected by non-Western societies, but

also abandoned by the elites of Western societies. All of the elements of the post-modern movement originated in Europe (particularly in France), where they could be seen as logical deductions from elements of the French Enlightenment. Post-modern ideologues have engaged in a compulsive anti-Western project in both Europe and America. They have been joined by their post-colonial counterparts in the non-Western world. Together, they have formed a grand alliance against Western civilization, and they seek to obliterate it everywhere around the world, and especially within the West itself.

The principle enemy of Western civilization is within the West itself. The West's great enemy today is the contemporary version of the Enlightenment, especially the French Enlightenment. Because of its universalist pretensions and illusions, its adherents have made the peoples of the West indiscriminating about other cultures and unconfident about their own. They have therefore made the West disoriented and vulnerable to assault from the East, and especially from Islam. This assault may come from sustained or catastrophic attacks by transnational networks of Islamic terrorists. Or it may come from similar attacks by members of the large and alienated Muslim communities now residing within the West, especially in Europe. However, for Western civilization, Islam is merely a disease of the skin; the Enlightenment, has mutated into a disease of the heart.<sup>9</sup>

**Defenders of the Faith:  
The Role of Liberals, Conservatives, and  
Neoconservatives**

Within the West itself, who are the conscious defenders of Western civilization in all its authenticity and fullness, and not merely of its Enlightenment universalist

heresy? Certainly not the liberals. Liberals in the intellectual sector (academia and the media) are largely multiculturalists and transnationalists; those in the business sector are largely globalists; and those in the political sector (most obviously in the Democratic Party in the United States) largely represent these post-Western intellectual and economic views. In any event, liberals have never liked tradition—and therefore the Western traditions—anyway. Indeed, they only accept their own tradition, that of the Enlightenment, if they reconceive it as being not a “tradition,” but rather “progress.”

One would, of course, expect conservatives to like and support tradition. But among purported conservatives today, it has become important to make a distinction between traditional conservatives and neoconservatives. From their origins (be it as followers of Leon Trotsky or of Leo Strauss), neo-conservatives have seen the Christian tradition as an alien, even a threatening, one. As for the classical tradition, their view of it has been formed by the decidedly untraditional interpretation of classical philosophy given by Strauss. The only Western tradition that the neoconservatives actually want to defend is the Enlightenment. They have wanted to defend it against attacks emanating from post-modernists, and in recent years, they have wanted to advance it in the rest of the world with the establishment of a kind of American empire. This latter is not a conservative project but a radical and revolutionary one. For the most part, it might be said that, with friends like the neoconservatives, Western civilization does not need enemies.

The true defenders of the Western traditions will be the traditional conservatives. They are able to recognize that the central and crucial tradition of Western civilization is the Christian tradition. The Christian religion assumed to itself and devel-

oped the best elements of the classical tradition, while subordinating them to a higher Biblical truth. The Christian religion also gave rise to the best elements of the Enlightenment tradition, while also subordinating them to a higher Biblical truth. It is the Christian tradition, in other words, that kept the other Western traditions in balance. Perhaps in our time it is the calling of those few traditional conservatives found within the educated elite to reach out to the large numbers of Christians within the wider population, to help deepen their understanding of the major issues before us, and to give voice to their Christian—and Western—convictions and concerns.

The protagonists of the contemporary version of the Enlightenment may think that they will create a global and universal civilization, both abroad and at home, but the evidence is accumulating that they have instead opened the doors to the barbarians, both without (e.g., Islamic terrorists) and within (e.g., pagan disregard for the dignity of human life). The best defense against the new barbarians will be found in the Christian religion. With the Christian tradition, Western civilization became the most creative, indeed the highest, civilization in human history. Without the Christian tradition, Western civilization could come to nothing. With a revival of the Christian tradition, Western civilization will not only prevail over the new barbarians, but it will become more truly civilized than it is today.

1. Latin America fits ambivalently within the West. Insofar as it is Latin, it is generally Western. Insofar as it is American in the sense of Amerindian, it is something else.

2. This section draws upon my “America and the West: Global Triumph or Western Twilight?” *Orbis* (Summer 2001), 333-341.

3. These are some of the civilizations identified by Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

4. James Kurth, “The Real Clash,” *The National Interest* (Fall 1994), 3-15.

5. J.C.D. Clark, “The United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany: Some Intellectual Premises of Transatlantic Alliances,” paper presented to the Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 7, 2003.

6. James Kurth, “NATO Expansion and the Idea of the West,” *Orbis* (Fall 1997), 555-567.

7. For more than a century thereafter, however, the classical tradition lived on in America in various ways, most strikingly in the erection of numerous splendid public buildings designed according to a succession of neo-classical styles. The most obvious of these was the U.S. Capitol, but at least forty state capitols were built in some kind of neo-classical style. By the 1950s, however, the hyper-modern (really, anti-classical), functional (anti-esthetic), and “international” (anti-national) style had completely supplanted the classical tradition in American and European architecture.

8. Kenneth Minogue, “‘Christophobia’ and the West,” *The New Criterion* (June 2003), 4-13.

9. On the challenge of Islam to the West, see Roger Scruton, *The West and the Rest: Globalization and the Terrorist Threat* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2002); see also James Kurth, “The New Protracted Conflict: The War and the West,” *Orbis* (Spring 2002), 321-331.