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BARBARIAN JUGGERNAUTS

It was 1983, and the Western powers—or an assortment of them—had finally taken it upon themselves to intervene in Lebanon’s long-running civil war. The United States and French forces were attempting to hold the ring in the face of multifactional anarchy and mayhem. It was in this context that a truck bomb was delivered, with devastating effect, into the heart of the U.S. marine barracks. The bomber burst his vehicle through the gates, drove up to the building, and blew himself and more than two hundred Americans into eternity. The stunned guard at the entrance to the compound was interviewed afterward. Too late he had realized what was happening. Too late he had grasped that the man at the wheel was a bomber who was successfully penetrating the outer cordon. As the truck driver drove past the guard, the latter reminisced, “he was smiling.”

He might well have smiled. For him, his own death would long ago have been settled in his mind as a price worth paying for immolating a large number of Americans. He had planned this mission for some time. As he drove through the gates, he knew that he had succeeded. Too late, the guard knew it too.

But what kind of hatred drove the truck driver to this appalling act? That participants in the civil war may have wished to continue their feuding around and in spite of the outside occupiers is understandable. That minor frictions between locals and peacekeepers could occur with the latter caught in the factional crossfire is also unsurprising. But why this?

Too many Westerners take refuge in simplistic explanations: fanaticism, extremism, “fundamentalism,” insanity. Such dismissals advance the task of comprehension not one jot; they reveal more about the





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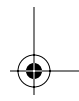
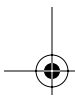
speaker than about the things, or the persons, described. They indicate not so much an understanding as a refusal to understand. All of these epithets indicate, in practice if not quite in theory, a mental banishment: “these things are so far distant from my own feelings or judgments that I shall make no attempt to comprehend them in their own terms, or to understand why these people, in their own estimation, act or think as they do.” And thus we are condemned, either to complete separation from crosscultural entanglements or else (since that is virtually impossible in the face of globalization) to the recurrence of such disasters.

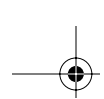
Let no one misconstrue my last use of the word *understand*. No implication of condoning whatsoever is intended. There are no shades here of “understand a little more; condemn a little less.” Only unqualified, unmitigated condemnation is appropriate in such cases. And yet there must be understanding (in the sense of mental comprehension) if we are to prevent repetition of the horrors.

Perhaps we should pause for breath here. Those preceding paragraphs were written at the end of the 1990s—that is, before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon of September 11, 2001. Following those terrible events, I found myself approached on two different occasions, once by a friend from church and once by two of my students, who wanted to talk the situation over with me because, they insisted, I had predicted just such attacks.

On the evening of the day itself, as the news from America began to register in London, I commented to someone that “this is just the beginning,” and was told, “Oh, don’t say that!”

Very well. Let us not say it. Let us pretend that everything will be well. Let us continue to ignore the real problems. Let us imagine that, if we continue to soft-soap manifestations of “religion,” non-Westerners will stand by as we absentmindedly obliterate their cultures. After all, that is what we have been doing until now. Even after September 11 our politicians continue to address the non-West as if all of the world were Westerners under the skin; everybody wants “freedom” and the consumerist





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paradise and, in order to obtain these things, considers the adoption of Western antivalues and the anticulture to be a price well worth paying.

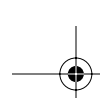
Let us turn our attention for a moment to a smaller but far more hopeful and positive anecdote before turning to the general picture that unites it with the darker scenario we have been considering. This story again concerns the Arab world in the early 1980s. This one takes place in Algeria before the present troubles. A group of young Westerners from a Christian mission organization was traveling through that Muslim country, where evangelism is strictly forbidden. These were no culturally insensitive Bible beltters, however, planning to transplant the values of rural Missouri to the Maghreb. A multinational group acutely aware of its own ignorance and impotence in such a (to them) hostile environment, they were aiming at very modest goals. Their intention was to travel through the country from north to south, from the populated coastal region, through the desert, and on into the countries of the Sahel beyond. Praying. Praying for the places they traveled through, for the people they met and for opportunities to evangelize individuals who appeared to be open to the gospel. Like the Lebanese bomb, they were traveling by truck.



The group stopped late one afternoon just beyond the last house in a village several hundred miles south of the coast. They got out, gathered round a fire, made a meal and then began singing their songs, quietly and reverently. After a couple of hours, an old man from the village came out of his house and wandered over to talk to them. He said that he had been watching them for a while, and that he was amazed. They were, he told them, unlike any Westerners he had encountered before, or had ever heard of. Why did they behave this way?

What surprised the old man? He had been expecting Westerners to make a noise, to turn their radios up, to spill Coke cans all over the desert, for their womenfolk to be baring arms and legs—or maybe more. These young people were doing none of these things. In a word, he expected them to be barbarians. It was a measure of the oddness of





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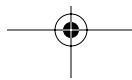
the occasion, and the oddness of these young people, that this time he was wrong.

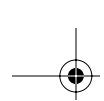
OBLIVIOUS DOMINATION

The truth is that Westerners are perceived by non-Westerners (if we can make such a huge generalization about a truly global phenomenon) as rich, technologically sophisticated, economically and politically dominant, morally contemptible barbarians. That is a hateful combination of feelings and assessments, in the sense that the one who makes them will, as often as not, be filled with hatred for the objects of such contemplation.

Why barbarians? For despising tradition, the ancestors and the dead. For despising religion, or at least for treating it lightly. For the shallowness and triviality of their culture. For their sexual shamelessness. For their loose adherence to family and, sometimes, also to tribe. For their absence of any sense of honor. These are massive charges, of course, and it will be necessary, in what follows, to say something about each in turn.

For the moment we simply note that they do, in point of fact, generate resentment—a resentment that can, as with the man driving the truck-bomb, amount to hatred. That is not to deny that many Western attributes and trappings are found desirable by non-Westerners. But precisely that desirability compounds the problem. Western culture, the very source of offense to traditional cultural sensibilities, has a habit of finding out the weak spots of the guardians of tradition and undermining them from within. The allure of heightened sexuality; or of status clothing, furnishings and possessions; or of personal independence: one would have to be superhuman not to feel the pull of these things or to be tempted by them. That is why many anti-Western movements, notably Islamists, wish to banish the very presence of the Western temptations, to take a separatist line, or at least to limit contacts with Western people and institutions to what can be dictated on their own cultural terms. As one Iranian leader of Ansare Hezbollah put it, “When you see





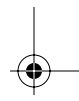
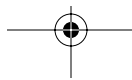
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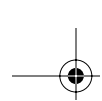
some people here dressed in American-style clothes, you are seeing the bullets of the West.”¹

Far more people than just Islamists, however, wish to modernize their countries without at the same time Westernizing them. Samuel Huntington has argued at length that that is the task in which much or most of the non-West is now engaged.² The extreme difficulty of such an enterprise lies in the fact that the West is the historic source of modernization and its principal present agent. Modernizing without Westernizing is a near impossible task of extrication. The Internet (to take only the most obvious example) knows no boundaries. To accept the technology is to accept the presence of pornography, advertising, commercial values and freedom of speech. In response, the Taliban in Afghanistan (admittedly one of the most extreme cases) did not shy away from banning virtually all aspects of modernity in their determination to sweep their collective house clean of Western contamination.

Very many, especially Third World, people have the sensation that everything they hold dear and sacred is being rolled over by an economic and cultural juggernaut that doesn't even know it's doing it . . . and wouldn't understand why what it's destroying is important or of value. That is why the defenders of traditionalism and advocates of cultural retrenchment in the non-West are perceived by Westerners as “fanatics,” “fundamentalists”—the epithets that express a refusal to understand. Why? Because they fly in the face of what, to Westerners, is “common sense.”

And the worst of it is that Westerners themselves are hardly aware of what they are doing, or of the very existence of the things they are destroying. Many non-Westerners feel that they have some understanding of Western culture; with television and pop music, to say nothing of the high-status artifacts on sale to those who can afford them, it would be strange indeed if they did not. But if the amount of understanding transmitted through those channels is likely to be superficial (life in the West being construed as somehow effortlessly prosperous), the level of under-





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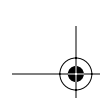
standing in the reverse direction—that is, of others by Westerners themselves—is almost negligible. After almost a decade of coverage of the Balkan wars on television, most Westerners are still unsure of the identities of the principal protagonists, and even news announcers occasionally betray the fact that they do not understand the meaning of the term “the former Yugoslavia.”³ Survey after survey shows the embarrassing ignorance of even educated Americans about the most fundamental features of the world outside their own country. Supporters of tradition in the non-West have the sensation that they are being rolled over by a juggernaut that does not even know they exist.

Westerners are so accustomed to this effortless superiority that the real nature of its origins is lost on them. As Huntington points out, “The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion . . . but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do.”⁴ Indeed, this obliviousness to reality persists, even when considering the present nature of international relationships. What to Westerners appears as “control of terrorism” or “maintaining free trade” bears quite a different face from the other side of the prosperity-poverty fence. Actions that, seen from a Western perspective, seem commonsensically altruistic—or at least neutral—appear riddled with double standards: “Democracy is promoted but not if it brings Islamic fundamentalism to power.” One thinks of Western acquiescence in the aborting of the Algerian elections and the continuation of the military regime. Furthermore,

nonproliferation is preached for Iran and Iraq but not for Israel; free trade is the elixir of economic growth but not for agriculture; human rights are an issue with China but not with Saudi Arabia; aggression against oil-owning Kuwaitis is massively repulsed but not against non-oil-owning Bosnians.⁵

The impatient “ah, but” responses that most of us (including me) will want to make to such complaints of inconsistency are beside the point





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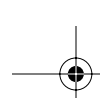
here; the point is to see how these “justifiable” actions by Western powers look very different from a non-Western—that is, from a majority—point of view. From that standpoint, the continued exertion of Western power across the world—cultural, economic, military—appears to be transparently self-seeking. “Human rights” and “free trade” appear to be no more than mantras bearing no connection with disinterested altruism, let alone with an ethical foreign policy.

And as for Western promises to clean up the mess afterwards . . . ! Reconstruction was promised for Bosnia, but nearly a decade after Dayton the country is still in the deep freeze. It was promised for Serbia after the Kosovo crisis and the fall of Milošević: still nothing. Afghanistan presents, admittedly, a bigger challenge—but don’t expect transformation of that country anytime soon. Tony Blair made the most shamelessly unbelievable promises to Macedonia in 2001 that, if the government would compromise with its Albanian separatist insurgents and accept NATO peacekeepers, then the country would definitely, oh-but-definitely, be fast-tracked into EU membership; predictably, not a thing has been heard of this promise since.

Violence is an unsurprising response to this predicament, a predicament that is experienced by many non-Westerners as humiliation. Quite obviously, violence is the only way to get the West’s attention. What else explains the feverish popularity of Saddam Hussein across the Arab world during the 1991 Gulf War? No one, not even Arabs, could be under any illusions but that Saddam was a brutal, murderous thug. But he was *their* brutal, murderous thug! Any spoke in the wheel of the Western juggernaut will serve. Similarly, few were under any illusions that Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait was a good thing; the opposition was not to the solution proposed by the West but to the West’s ability to impose a solution in “Arab space” at all.

Islamist movements were on the rise before the end of the Cold War. With the demise of communism, however, their accelerated growth could have been predicted. The appeal of Marxist guerrilla movements across





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much of the non-Western world during the 1950s to 1980s had never lain in the nature of the Marxist creed itself. That had been, if anything, a handicap. Those in the know could see that it did not work; those not in the know (mostly Third World peasants) could hardly be expected to understand the full intricacies of its philosophy. The appeal had rested in the nature of antithesis: it was a weapon against the Western juggernaut. By the end of the 1980s, the socialist project was everywhere in ruins. Islamist movements have become the partial inheritors of Marxism's cachet. Obviously, this hardly applies in Latin America; in parts of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa—or among urban blacks in America itself—it has nevertheless become the ideological vehicle for anti-Westernism.

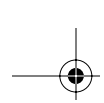
Terrorism has been called the weapon of the weak; the weak can be relied upon to use such weapons as they have. Terrorism has the advantage of using the West's own distinctive features against it: an open society (to aid infiltration and hiding); instant and full news coverage (to maximize the political effect); a horror of death or of sustaining even small numbers of casualties (resulting from the absence of any deep-rooted sense of transcendence and also from the sheer comfort of Westerners' lives). After any action, the rule of law can make prosecution difficult, keeps sentencing mild and mostly rules out any kind of blanket retribution (though the September 11 attacks put that last point under pressure). Viewed in that light, the man driving the truck-bomb becomes easier to understand.

A moment ago, we noted a number of criteria by which Westerners appear to non-Westerners as barbarous. These qualities of barbarism are so contentious that we shall now have cause to notice them individually.

NO VOTES FOR THE DEAD

No society has succeeded in breaking with the past and its own traditions as comprehensively as that of the modern West. Indeed, only in Western ideals is "breaking with the past" an admirable thing to do. We shall consider this at more length later in this book. For now it is sufficient to notice that Westerners do not in any sense see themselves as hav-





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ing an obligation to reproduce the ways of their ancestors, or to be faithful to the memory of their forefathers; even to mention such things risks evoking an amused smile. And yet such sensibilities have been all but unanimous in traditional cultures—including our own before the onset of modernity. The Chinese tradition of ancestor-worship is not entirely untypical; the medieval European cult of the saints amounted to the same thing. Both represent a willingness to be faithful to the past, and to include the voices—and even the (metaphorical) presence—of the dead in the discussions of the living.

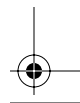
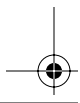
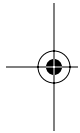
Nowadays, we may visit the grave of a loved one and “talk to Gran,” but we know even there that we do this primarily for ourselves; the sense of transcendence and of historical continuity with both past and future that could give deeper meaning to such rituals largely eludes us. The sense of specific obligation even to the recent dead, let alone to distant ancestors, is little more than a folk memory.

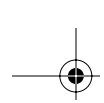
In the early 1990s, a British schoolgirl in her early teens killed herself. A suicide note explained that she had been mercilessly bullied by a gang of other girls and that she could no longer face life in such circumstances. A senior police officer, interviewed on the radio the following day, explained that the prime concern of his officers and of social workers brought in to the case was in caring for the gang members who might be distraught by feelings that they were responsible for the girl’s death. As he pointed out, his responsibility was not to the dead, for whom he could now do nothing, but to the living.

Only in the West. The example is an extreme one, but for that very reason it illustrates graphically the triumph of sentience over fact. The dead feel nothing; while their relatives’ interests are still of some account, the deceased themselves have no interests—or even existence—that we can or should take into account. And as for our long-dead ancestors . . .

CONDESCENSION TOWARD RELIGION

The question of the nonexistence of obligations to the dead, of course,





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touches on the absence of transcendence in Western societies. Most, though not all, major cultures have been underpinned by adherence to a major religion. The West is unusual in having debunked its own and also in rigorously excluding religious issues from public life.

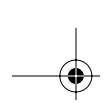
Even more remarkable is the cheerful confidence displayed by most Westerners in the falsity of any “hard” religious claims. What eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rationalism began, the rise of functional rationality and technocracy has completed.

As modernization drives forward, more and more of what was formerly left to God, or human initiative and the processes of nature is classified, calculated and controlled by the use of reason. When reason has harnessed all the facts, figures and forces, divine intervention is as unwelcome as accident, divine law as antiquated as the divine right of kings. Human spontaneity becomes “the human factor,” the weak link in the chain of procedures. Wonder, along with humility and the sanctity of things, is totally out of place. . . . [It] is not that practical reason is irreligious, but that in more and more areas of life religion is practically irrelevant.⁶

As the sociologist David Lyon puts it, “Acts of Parliament or parking meters will answer all.”⁷

In Western experience, the countries that modernized first were those, like Britain and the Netherlands, in which leading religious institutions lost the power during the early-modern period to enforce themselves on the populace, and so granted a limited religious toleration. With the passing of time, the scope of the toleration widened. The rise of the United States (which was founded on the principle of the separation of church and state) as the preeminently modern society compounded the perceived link between modernity and secularization. The Catholic countries of southern Europe modernized more slowly and later, and did so in the teeth of Catholic resistance. When we remember that the Enlightenment project began, in part, as a reaction against the





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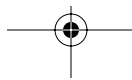
religious wars of the seventeenth century, and so as a search for a rational, nonreligious basis for public policy, it is not hard to see how religion has retreated further and further into the private sphere of the home and personal devotion—if even there.

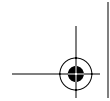
Tom Paine, writing in 1792, was a little ahead of his time in the vigor with which he expressed the connection between secularism and modernity, but as in so many things, he was a popular herald of intellectual trends and an apologist for modernizing views. Referring to the connection of church and state, he commented, “We shall see the ill effects it has had on the prosperity of nations. The union of church and state has impoverished Spain. The revoking the Edict of Nantes drove the silk manufacture from France into England.”⁸ Religion, urged Paine, had no business in public life, for

if everyone is to judge of his own religion, there is no such thing as a religion that is wrong; but if they are to judge of each other’s religion, there is no such thing as a religion that is right; and therefore, all the world is right, or all the world is wrong. But with respect to religion itself, . . . it is man bringing to his Maker the fruits of his heart.

Religion in the West has spent the next two centuries crawling into the box that Paine opened for it. It remains now a museum piece, a refuge of “the heart” but, with respect to actions in the world, above (or perhaps beneath) rightness or wrongness, truth or falsehood.⁹

By now it is “common sense” that religion cannot and should not be a motivating force in public life. Public metanarratives about rights and responsibilities, economic requirements, environmental threats, etc., must be careful to root themselves in no deeper soil than that of public utility; they may not notice the divine. Consequently, even the actions of private individuals are unlikely to take religious motivations seriously. Even consciously committed religious believers in Western countries live highly secularized lives; they do not, in actual fact, spend nearly as





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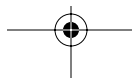
much time in religious devotions, or in hedging their actions and decisions with religious criteria and considerations, as does even a very averagely devout but non-Westernized Muslim in an Islamic country, or a Hindu in India. It is all very embarrassing for the Christian missionary in the non-West. Religion as a personal spiritual technique and consolation (like, say, meditation) survives in the West; religious doctrine as a guide to action in the world and to the shape of ultimate reality is considered crazy, even dangerous. If one differs from this assessment, it is bad taste to do anything other than keep quiet about it.

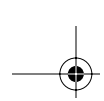
When Westerners are confronted with other cultures that do differ, they are characteristically struck by a combination of incredulity, embarrassment, amusement and irritation at such “backwardness.” Convinced by their background that religion is set to die out, yet confronted by powerful evidence to the contrary, “It is this painful cognitive dissonance . . . that accounts for the peculiar rancor and intolerance” of the irreligious toward the devout.¹⁰ When conflicts break out in the non-West over religious issues—as they frequently do—the Western “common sense” approach is further confirmed; Westerners themselves would not risk their lives in conflict for anything but personal self-interest (certainly not for abstractions like “democracy”). This outlook manifests itself in an attitude of condescension toward those of deeply held religious beliefs, a condescension so transparent that it invariably leads to irritation—and worse—on the part of its objects.



THE CULTURE OF TRIVIALITY

The shallowness and triviality of Western culture—for example, its obsession with fashion or with entertainers—is certainly not without its appeal for non-Westerners either. But the spread of such fads to the non-West is perceived as part of the threat to traditional values. The things traditionally prized—wisdom, skills in hunting and riding, religion, honor, the creation of solid or beautiful artifacts—all related directly or indirectly to the business of staying alive and perpetuating the community and its values into





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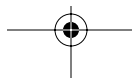
the future. By contrast, the obsessions of the West (or of its copycat Third World variants) are connected with appearance, ephemerality and, as often as not, the commercialization of sex.

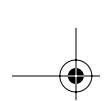
The possible benefits of consuming a McDonald's hamburger, for example, include my own enjoyment and convenience and (if the country where I live is poor enough to admire such things) the status I will attain from haunting such an eating-house. I am also identifying myself as a cosmopolitan, whose tastes, aspirations and connections transcend the limits of the purely local. It is the kind of buzz that some Westerners can still experience (though less and less these days) from frequent, especially long-distance, air travel: the kudos that used to be associated with the phrase "the jet set." To the traditional world of social stability, solidarity and permanence, this is all anathema. It is not simply a difference in judgment about taste (puns aside) but about the whole meaning of social existence. It is a clash of cultures. McDonald's represents the egocentric, the noncommunitarian, the nontraditional, the foreign, the unrestrained, the self-indulgent. It represents the West. That is not to say that it is not desirable, or even tempting—but that is precisely what makes it a problem.

Clearly, the same could be said of fashions in clothing. Or of film stars. Their very allure threatens to substitute the transitory and the ephemeral for the settled and the solid. To that extent, they are not merely similar to the temptation of taking drugs; they are the same temptation. Like drugs, they seem to threaten anarchy. Countries that are too poor to be run on democratic lines cannot allow their members the kinds of individualistic freedoms and lifestyle choices that imply democratic values. They have to rest on something more solid.

SEXUAL SHAMELESSNESS

The ability of a run-of-the-mill disco in outer-London suburbia to advertise a weekly "lust night" in an effort to boost attendance illustrates, even more graphically than the sexualized nature of advertising or of fashion





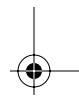
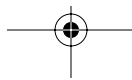
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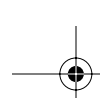
clothing, the prevalence of sexual shamelessness.

Sexual immorality is no kind of exclusive preserve of the contemporary West, of course, though perhaps the all-pervasiveness of it is. That all-pervasiveness is part of the reason for the passion with which Westerners reject religious values as any kind of guide to action, or as anything more than a personal spiritual technique. If religion reemerged from Paine's box, it would start raising truth-claims and impinging on our freedom of action in such areas as sexual behavior.

But any departures from sexual propriety have been accompanied in all traditional societies—even including, for this purpose, the West itself until the mid-twentieth century—by a sense of shame and disgrace that, far more than any formal sanctions, did much to keep such behavior within bounds. The overall direction of Western culture away from such restrictions has been vastly accelerated by the invention of (mostly) reliable methods of birth control. Campaigners against the dissemination of contraceptives in the early twentieth century argued that it would increase promiscuity; their opponents replied that on the contrary, it would increase domestic harmony and empower women. Domestic harmony has not noticeably improved since then, at least as measured by the divorce statistics; the sexual bargaining power of women (that is, a woman's ability to make sexual favors conditional upon a man's lifetime commitment to keep her and her offspring) has collapsed; promiscuity has risen sharply. It is hard not to conclude that the predictions of the "no" campaigners were correct.

By now, sexual "freedom" has been elevated to the status of principle in most Western countries. Consequently, it can come as no surprise that Westerners are viewed with the same disdain in this regard that unmarried mothers in the 1960s experienced from the older generation. One incident in the mid-1990s illustrates this clash of cultures well. A thirteen-year-old British girl met a young Turkish waiter while on vacation in his country and a romance began. They wished to marry and, with the support of his family and the girl's single mother, did so, at which the British





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press was scandalized and outraged. Although the Turkish authorities eventually intervened and the relationship broke up, ordinary Muslims were perplexed. Many Western girls indulge in sex at this age, and teenage pregnancies are common; here was a man willing to act not immorally, but morally, by taking a young girl into the permanent arrangement of marriage. Where was the problem? Did Westerners actually prefer promiscuity? Or was it just another case of anti-Muslim prejudice?

But the differences really did go all the way down to the ground. Sex at thirteen was not really the problem for Westerners; if it was, they would make serious efforts in schools, homes and courts of law to stop it—but of course they do not. What was really scandalous to the Western mind was the foreclosing of future freedoms at such a young age by the bond of marriage.

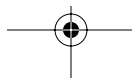
Small wonder that Western women are considered “easy” in non-Western countries. Small wonder that non-Western men are torn between the desire to sample the forbidden fruit, which their contacts with the Western lifestyle offer, and the urge to lock up their own womenfolk for fear that they may be contaminated by it.

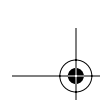


HANGING LOOSE TO THE FAMILY

The fragility of families is an obvious corollary of sexual freedom. Sex is what makes families both possible and necessary; if it is not regulated, then the structure of the family will inevitably become diffuse.

In prosperous, urbanized economies, such as those of the contemporary West, the unavoidable dependency of older people, children, nursing mothers and pregnant women on the working population can be mediated through bureaucracies, welfare, public and private pension plans, and government schooling. Families, the traditional support network, can afford to fail as the principal mechanism of economic provision. (Whether or not this is really the case, of course, is hotly disputed, but at least prosperous countries can afford to mess around with social experiments on the hypothesis that it is true, with-





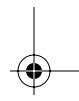
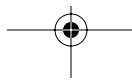
WHY THE REST HATES THE WEST

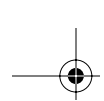
out anyone actually starving to death.) In any other kind of society (i.e., all traditional societies in the past and Third World countries today), survival depends on enduring relationships with known individuals, particularly family members.

Consequently, family has been a principal focus of values and devotion in every culture. The very phrase “filial piety” (seldom used now) reminds us of the gravitas that used to be attached to the family bond. To be sure, Western countries retain the lip service of rhetoric about “the family,” but they do not want to pay the price of restricted freedom on personal actions that any actualization of the rhetoric could imply. “Family” is a “sunset value” in the West; the more the reality declines, the more its power as an emotional connotation-word increases. So Westerners mostly insist that “different sorts of family are possible”—or “equally valid,” as the favored phrase goes. (Valid? With reference to what?) Even the more conservative of them frequently live hundreds of miles from their aging parents and view them, however affectionately, as an encumbrance.

Idealization of the “extended families” of the past is as mistaken as avoiding the uncomfortable truths about the present; life under the eye of an aged patriarch (or, more often, matriarch) could be tyrannous. There are parts of the Arab world where mothers-in-law continue to undertake the duties of subjugating their daughters-in-law with all customary relish.

It was the industrial revolution that first forced our ancestors to “get on their bikes” (as Norman Tebbit said) and look for work. Only a minority of them moved far from home at first—mostly no farther than the nearest industrial town. But once the first few generations of urbanites had grown up with no continuing family links to the countryside, the anonymity of existence in a large town became the norm. The nuclear family became a self-contained, free-floating social unit in an urban soup of people. It made its own decisions about where to live, what to buy, which job to take and whom to marry, with less and less reference to the



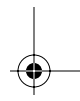
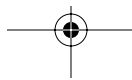
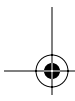


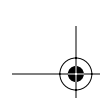
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concerns or opinions of wider kinfolk. The tyrannous mother-in-law has been replaced by the supplicant old lady, pleading or wheedling for a few chances each year to see her own grandchildren. And in our own time, of course, even the nuclear family has begun to break down.

The very notions of going to work and, even more, of the middle-class concept of pursuing a career have transformed the nature of the family. Before the industrial revolution, comparatively few people “went out to work”; economic production took place in and around the home. The family was itself the unit of economic production. That was—and in the Third World still is—part of the reason why family solidarity was so necessary for survival. It also had the effect of creating much stronger bonds between people. The advent of going out to work, however, made the home a unit of consumption, not production; it was where people brought back the paycheck. The family became primarily a unit of emotional support and consumer spending, divorced from economic output. The world started to be divided into public and private realms.

If going out to work increased geographic mobility, pursuing a career accelerated the process. Careers were—and are—for the bourgeois and the professional; by definition, they exclude the unskilled and the laborer. They also need, more often than not, to be pursued over a wide terrain. If the company wants to move you to Yorkshire or Alabama, you had better move. If the firm is too small to provide room for advancement, you open the trade journal and check out the “help wanted” column. With the “bourgeoisification” of Western societies, especially since the Second World War, lifelong association with place has been strangled. Where adherence to place and the solidarity of wider kin-groups still carry any weight, it is an almost infallible sign, as in southern Italy, of economic poverty and social backwardness. Unless you are willing to have your horizons limited by the town of your birth, then close association across the generations, and between siblings over a lifetime, will be the exception, not the rule. For Westerners, that is now common sense.





WHY THE REST HATES THE WEST

NO QUESTION OF HONOR

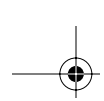
If most of the values that characterized societies throughout history, and still characterize non-Westernized people, are merely rejected by Westerners, the value of "honor" is scarcely even understood by them. In the Western mind, an insistence on honor is equivalent to a sort of ludicrous strutting posture adopted by those with little to strut about, like a cock crowing on its own dunghill. We might agree that it is the characteristic of poor societies (though it is certainly not confined to the poor within those societies). Those who have little else can at least have a reputation for honor.

But for us, its last echoes are present in the gangster movie or the cowboy film, where the gunman gets the man who killed his brother. It is present in the feud of the Mafiosi or under the Albanian Kanun of Lek Dukagjin. Apart from such picturesque remnants from Europe's late-developing Sicilian or Balkan margins, however, honor is now the preserve of the non-West.

Honor is about the avoidance of losing face. It is about the battle against shame. But concepts of shame can only have a strong hold where there is an ingrained sense of right and wrong. This is absent from the West, where ethical matters, like religion and choice of career, are held to be subjects of personal preference. If shamelessness is extended to sexual matters, its presence can be more or less taken for granted anywhere else.

To be sure, honor can lead to behavior that Westerners have long regarded (and probably rightly) as immoral—such as the blood feud. It is associated with pride, with cruelty to women and with showy pretense. But to the defenders of honor, these are but spiteful names for dignity, chastity and fortitude, values too little regarded in the West. Some aspects of honor are also connected with moral enterprises—such as hospitality—which even a Westerner must admit to be praiseworthy. Most cultures have a tradition of hospitality far more sacrificial than that of Westerners—and it is based on the honor principle: the guest gets the very best, however much it hurts.





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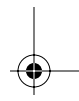
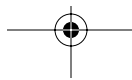
POTS AND KETTLES?

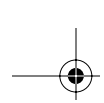
For most Westerners, if charges of barbarism are appropriate language to level at anybody or anything at all, they generally refer to material conditions. Westerners might refer to dirty living accommodations, or eating or washing facilities, as “barbarous.” Even more commonly, they might designate cruel treatment of people or animals as “barbaric.” (Already we can see how quickly the charge of barbarism can be thrown back at some non-Westerners; the mind flashes at once to images of hand amputations or of female “circumcision.”)

Such usages certainly have a fair amount of historical justification behind them. The barbaric was understood to be in contrast to that which was urban and literally “civilized” (meaning rooted in the *civis*, the city); it was the disordered as opposed to the settled, the crude rather than the refined. It referred to what was still in a state of nature, as opposed to what had been subjected to human modification and improvement. This kind of use extends back to the Romans, for whom the *barbari* were the bearded ones (or, as we might say, “the great unwashed”) beyond the frontiers of the Empire.

It also meant simply “foreign” or “strange”—a person who stammered “bar-bar” in a clumsy attempt to speak one’s own language. From that point of view, of course, it could be argued that all cultures are “barbarous” to all others. Different folks, different folkways; there is nothing further to be said. Yet this would be to miss the point. For in actual practice, and aside from the niceties of etymology, a charge of barbarism contains an actual judgment with wider reference than the mere absolutizing of one’s own culture. A barbarian is living or behaving in a way that is unnecessarily brutish or animal-like.

The Romans themselves, it should be remembered, were capable of cruelties all the more extreme and terrifying for being so ruthlessly efficient and organized, whether the mass crucifixions of Spartacus’s slave-revolt or of rebellious Jews in Palestine, whether the throwing of criminals and Christians to the lions or the gladiatorial fights to the death be-



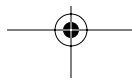


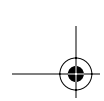
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fore bloodthirsty audiences of tens of thousands. The Romans would doubtless have defended themselves against charges of barbarism because their violence was so well orchestrated and disciplined, unlike the wild fury of the tribal war-hosts. The Nazis made the same defense of their death camps. Many of us, it is to be hoped, would beg to differ from so narrow a definition.

It is not intended to take issue with contemporary Western identifications of barbarism. Doubtless they are justified, but the ambiguity in the case of the Romans and their cruelty should remind us that modern Western countries have put a premium on sensibility; for us, cruelty is one of the few crimes we can still rouse ourselves to condemn. It is not that the condemnation is unjust (for it assuredly is not), but that the infliction of physical or emotional pain is not the only measure of barbarism, any more than a pain-free life is the only good. Cruelty has more power to shock us (whose lives are, after all, more comfortable than those of any other people who have ever lived), and that is probably all to the good. But that sensibility comes at a price. The price is a desensitizing to many other evils that all cultures but ours have considered offensive. That their offensiveness eludes us is no small measure of our own barbarism.

The ordinary, everyday experience of most of the people who have ever lived—frequent exposure to cold and wet; infrequent washing; the need to kill, skin and clean one's own dinners; strong and unpleasant smells; expectations of high infant mortality; the need to handle dead bodies; chronic and untreatable illness and pain; short life expectancy—looks harsh and cruel enough to the eyes of a pampered, modern or postmodern Westerner. In traditional societies, any sanctions against miscreants or firm treatments of others start with that (to us) harsh-enough experience of every day as a base line. Any rough treatment or punishment that is a punishment will, by definition, have to be harsher than that. That does not in any way excuse witch burning, or the “death of ten thousand cuts,” or female circumcision. But it does signal to us that most cultures—and individuals—have had “tolerance levels” of





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physical harshness and cruelty (that is, in inflicting it and in witnessing it) that exceed our own. Cruelty has been condemned by all cultures, but it is not surprising if, in most cases, the far ends of the spectra of permissibility jut out consistently well beyond ours.

* * *

We can insist, if we will, on our own canons of what constitutes “barbarism”: cruelty as measured by distance from our own unique comforts; restrictions on behavior as contrasted with the freedoms made possible by our own superabundant wealth; social distinction as measured against our own atomized individualism and egalitarianism. But then we will find that we have excommunicated all cultures but our own, as well as our own past. We may decide not to shrink even from that move, of course, but then we cannot simultaneously continue to insist that we are being tolerant and (of all things!) multicultural. By absolutizing the unique—not to say historically aberrant—culture of the post-Enlightenment West, we have become the ultimate cultural imperialists. And then we wonder why we’re hated.

