

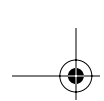
INTRODUCTION

Tolerance is a fine thing—if you can get it. That, apparently, is what distinguishes us in the West from our various recent and present antagonists around the globe, whether Saddam’s Iraq, the Afghan Taliban or Kim Jong-Il’s North Korea. The war against terrorism is a war against the enemies of freedom. Tony Blair, giving the speech of his life to an entranced U.S. Congress on July 17, 2003, insisted that “the purpose of terrorism is . . . the elimination of tolerance.” For tolerance and openness are at the core of what, in recent years, British and American political leaders have often referred to as “our values,” while simultaneously (and contradictorily) asserting that they are “the universal values of the human spirit.”

To deal with the former claim (“our values”) first: I’m not so sure. Is tolerance a “distinctive”? It might more reasonably be called an indistinctive. It is an agreement that a previously monolithic society makes with a minority: we will tolerate you and your strange ways for reasons that seem good to us (because we think it just, or because the advantages of doing so outweigh the disadvantages—or whatever) at the price of our overall culture being a little less sharply and rigidly defined than it has been before. Now, we agree to smudge the edges so that we can include you.

Or maybe, instead of this scenario, there never was a monolith in the first place. Perhaps a lot of minorities come together—as in the American example—and agree to tolerate one another’s funny ideas and habits. But in the process they become, for outsiders, hard to describe as a collectivity. Their culture becomes indistinct. And internally, the different





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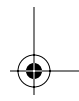
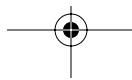
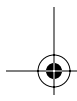
minorities' subcultures are subjected, over time, to the "melting-pot" effect. America could manage even this, partly because of its sheer size, which allowed the separate subcultures to maintain their existence, albeit in greatly modified form, and partly because, in their wisdom, the founding fathers greatly restricted the powers of government to interfere in the lives of its citizens.

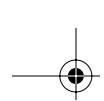
The fact remains, however, that tolerance is a feature that, unless it is unique to one country, makes it indistinct from others—especially over time. This, of course, may be a price well worth paying if the alternative is intolerance. And if the matter were to be left there, this would all be fine; the downside would be more than outweighed by the upside. Indeed, the diversity would be positively enriching—as most pluralist societies have found, to their great gain.

Unfortunately, however, this is not the end of the story. The currency of the term *tolerance* has recently become badly debased. Where it used to mean the respecting of real, hard differences, it has come to mean instead a dogmatic abdication of truth-claims and a moralistic adherence to moral relativism—departure from either of which is stigmatized as *intolerance*.

Whatever the causes or the justice of this shift, the fact of it is indisputable. With it, the underpinnings of the various subcultures are knocked away. Where the old tolerance allowed hard differences on religion and morality to rub shoulders and compete freely in the public square, the new variety wishes to lock them all indoors as matters of private judgment; the public square must be given over to indistinctness. If the old tolerance was, at least, a real value, the new, intolerant "tolerance" might better be described as an antivalue; it is a disposition of hostility to any suggestion that one thing is "better" than another, or even that any way of life needs protected space from its alternatives.

With this shift, the threat to distinctness becomes greatly exacerbated. It is not just totalitarian ideologues who will come into conflict with us Westerners; anyone who cares about their culture, and has





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enough exposure to us and our way of doing things to be affected by us, will feel threatened.

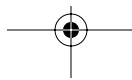
The same can be said of *openness*. The American academic Allan Bloom, after a lifetime of teaching undergraduate students, found the relapse into bland, contentless niceness to be the death of any meaningful intellectual life. He described it this way:

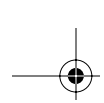
Openness—and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and various ways of life and kinds of human beings—is the great insight of our times. The true believer is the real danger. The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all.¹

His book *The Closing of the American Mind* was an all-out assault on this dogmatic nescience. For *openness*, by definition, excludes the possibility of closing on the truth—because then you are no longer open. It is therefore hostile to hard truth claims. While this fixed openness is very compatible with the new meaning of *tolerance*, it renders the original meaning absurd.

Openness, then, is not a value, but an antivalue. Our politicians' claims notwithstanding, it cannot be part of our identity, because it excludes all hard definitions of identity; and by its insistent hyperinclusivity, it destroys any real meaning of *we* (because it cannot be distinguished from *non-we*). Hence its accompanying prattle about "community" is rendered meaningless. And if we cannot see that point, non-Westerners certainly can.

Despite these problems, in the past twenty years or so tolerance (new-style) and openness have passed beyond the stage of being consciously held ideals in Western countries; they have become foundational to the





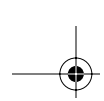
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Western outlook. The person who does not hold them is increasingly looked at with bafflement or disbelief. They have become part of “common sense.”

And what is that? “Common sense,” like a presupposition, is what we think before we think we’re thinking. (You may want to read that sentence again!) It is the common stock of presuppositions current in one’s own particular society. Some of those ideas are doubtless genuinely “common” in the sense that all human communities really have shared them. Dropped objects fall to the ground. Death and pain are everywhere ordinarily to be avoided. Any culture that ignored these truisms would not endure—and so the normal state of affairs that did receive them as common sense would reassert itself. (Exceptions to the avoidance of death and pain—in respect of duty, love, religious purposes, etc.—are accorded appropriate solemnity or honor precisely because the occasions that trigger them are so extreme that even common sense is to be laid aside.)

Some of our other presuppositions (like, say, the importance of privacy), however, are not genuinely common at all, though existentially they may appear to be so. If all of the people around us share a certain idea, sentiment or expectation about life and social discourse, as somehow “obvious”—and if we ourselves have been brought up to share the same expectations—we will consider it to be a part of common sense. Even so, the perception in question may be one that has been current only in our own society. It may, indeed, have been current even there only for a limited amount of time. (As Patricia Crone puts it, “We all take the world in which we were born for granted and think of the human condition as ours. This is a mistake. The vast mass of human experience has been made under quite different conditions.”²) But if enough of our social world has been built around that limited bit of experience that is our own and that takes its truth as axiomatic, we will be hard to persuade that it is anything other than a self-evident truth. If confronted by individuals or groups who differ from this perception and who behave accordingly, we





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will probably consider them to be stupid, crazy or perhaps fanatical.

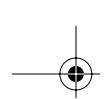
Unfortunately, this is precisely the bind in which the Western world finds itself at the start of the third millennium. Its ideas of “common sense”—the common values shared (to differing degrees, certainly) by Western societies generally—are sharply at odds with those of the non-Western cultures that confront them. Indeed, they are sharply at odds with the values and ideas of the West’s own history. To some extent, of course, this is hardly surprising. Indeed, it is what one would expect. What anybody means by a “culture” (in the widest sense of that word) is a set of distinctive attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that distinguish it from all others. However, there are several factors that make it increasingly urgent for Westerners to obtain a clear view of what makes their own culture tick so that, seeing themselves, they can more clearly understand why the rest of the world considers them—as it most assuredly does—to be dangerously seductive, but domineering, barbarians.



THE ODDNESS OF WESTERN “COMMON SENSE”

In the first place, the assumptions of the Western worldview are more sharply distinguished from those of other people than has been the case with any other major culture in history. The grounds for misunderstanding (including self-misunderstanding) and enmity toward others are greater. Put simply, a fourth-century Japanese, a fourteenth-century English peasant, an eighteenth-century Maori, a nineteenth-century Congolese and an early-twentieth-century Azeri all would have had more in common with one another, both in the condition of their material lives and in their assumptions about the world and social discourse within it, than any of them would have had with early-third-millennium Americans, Britons or Germans. “Most people, and certainly most members of western civilization, are thus born into a world which differs radically from that of their ancestors, with the result that most of human history is a closed book to them.”³ More to our point, most contemporary non-Western experiences, assumptions and values are an incomprehensible





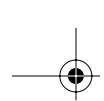
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“closed book” to them also. For, to the extent that they remain “un-Westernized,” we could have added a large number of contemporary Third World citizens to our list of historical exotics without altering the equation. However, most non-Westerners are, in practice, in the process of being Westernized—or at least they are feeling the pressures of Western life on their own traditional cultures. Not only does that affect the equation we have been making here, but it brings us to our next point in respect of the urgency for Westerners to understand their own underlying ideas of what constitutes common sense.

For, in the second place, Westerners have been enjoying a period of global dominance during the past couple of centuries. Although that dominance is now in marked decline, the process of globalization itself—in communications, in the spread of technological developments, in economic trends, to say nothing of the movement of people—is continuing. Mutual incomprehension is a dangerous state of affairs for millions of people whose lives are increasingly bound up with one another.

For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Westerners hardly felt the need to take alternative worldviews seriously, since Western values, customs and ideas seemed so obviously set to dominate the world. The outlooks of Muslims, Chinese or Hindus seemed at that time to be so much historical debris, of interest to anthropologists and museums, perhaps, but not as material for serious mental engagement or as demanding to be understood in their own terms by anyone other than academic specialists or missionaries. They were but variant forms of the primitivism, which, like snow in springtime, was melting away in the sunshine of Western modernity and newness. However, continuing Western economic power is now spawning not only emulation by non-Western societies but also cultural retrenchment and confrontation. The rising tide of Islamism, both in the Islamic world and among Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries, is merely the most prominent example of this trend. If sub-Saharan Africa seems to show a continued willingness to absorb Western influences (however ineffectually



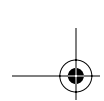


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in terms of its own development), the great civilizations of Asia—Chinese, Hindu, Japanese and others—are declining the offer of further assimilation along Western lines. The collapse of communism has led to the reassertion of Orthodox culture across wide regions of Eastern Europe. Any further globalization—of the economy or anything else—will not take place simply on the basis of an uncritical adoption of Western attitudes and values. Westerners can no longer act on the bland assumption that their ideas about what constitutes common sense are universal or beyond examination.

In any case (and this brings me to my third point), the picture of Western domination is changing. The globalization continues, but the idea that this is equivalent to Westernization can no longer be taken for granted. Some statistics illustrate the point. In 1928, the West produced 84.2 percent of all manufactured goods in the world; by 1980, this was down to 57.8 percent. In 1950, Western countries had 64.1 percent of total world gross economic product; by 1992, this was only 48.9 percent. In 1920, almost half the world's population—48.1 percent—was under the political control (including empires) of Western governments. Now the empires are gone and populations are declining in the Western countries themselves; the comparable statistic at the start of the new millennium is around an eighth of the population, at 12.5 percent. Historically, population booms are accompanied by a rise in the political influence of the country or culture that is booming, and the population boom right now (forecast to continue until the 2020s) is in the Islamic world.⁴ As an illustration of the Islamic population shift and its effects, it is worth noticing that the large rise in the population of Kosovar Albanians (who are mostly Muslim) was no small factor in the long- to medium-term causes of the Kosovo crisis, especially when one considers that the Serb birthrate was—and is—low and stagnant. According to some estimates, if Kosovo had remained fully incorporated in the Yugoslav state, Muslim Kosovar recruits would have constituted a majority in the Yugoslav army as a whole sometime in the 2030s!



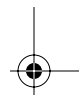
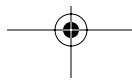


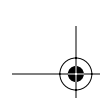
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THE UNAVOIDABILITY OF CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

The significance of these shifts should not be underestimated. One of the most insightful, as well as one of the best-selling, books of political analysis of the 1990s was Samuel P. Huntington's masterpiece, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, which argued persuasively that the end of the Cold War and the "death of ideology" were ushering in a return to civilizational politics. As he sees it, international cooperation and international conflict are increasingly dominated by long-term cultural factors, with alliances between cultural brethren and flash points along civilizational fault lines. The example of the Balkans, where three major cultures meet, is so obvious as hardly to need mentioning, but the choosing of diplomatic "sides" by outside powers during the 1999 Kosovo crisis also fits Huntington's analysis exactly.⁵

The boundaries of the West may be larger than they were during the Cold War, but not by much; the Catholic countries of central and eastern Europe (Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Lithuania) can be incorporated into the structures of NATO, the European Union and so on, with a minimum of fuss and bother, not because the authorities in Brussels and Strasbourg have a prejudice in favor of Catholicism but because those countries have economies, political institutions and social attitudes that are more closely consonant with those already prevailing in the West, and this consonance is rooted in the long-term shaping effects of Western Christendom. Both Hungary and Belgium, for example, are secularized societies now, yet the mindsets of their populations have more in common with one another than does either with the mentality prevalent in, say, Macedonia. The same rule of long-term consonance would be true of Estonia and Latvia, which are unusual for this region in being Protestant; the contrast is not between Catholicism and "others," but between "Western Christendom" and Eastern Orthodoxy. With the sole exception of Cyprus, all of the ten new entrants to the EU are part of historic Western Christendom. (The only country part of that historic entity not yet invited to join is Croatia.) Cyprus, of course, has strong at-





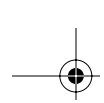
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tachments to the already-belonging Greece.

If Huntington is right, there will be several areas where the boundaries of the West are actually contracting. During the Cold War, when the Soviet threat loomed large, Turkey was firmly on board. Now her alignment is more uncertain, and her condition as what Huntington calls a “torn” country (torn, that is, between the Westernizing, secular heirs of Kemal Atatürk and the rising power of the Islamists) is becoming more apparent. In view of her record in respect to human rights and a whole host of other matters, only American pressure makes Turkey acceptable as a candidate for EU membership. And the extreme ambivalence toward her application can only strengthen the hand of the supporters of Islamist retrenchment inside Turkey itself. Within the pre-2004 European Union, it was Greece, the only member that is not a historical part of Western Christendom, that did not fit, whether in economic matters or the alphabet, in matters as diverse as diplomatic sympathies in the Kosovo crisis and its willingness to imprison street evangelists. On the other side of the world, Japan has been distancing itself from the close alignment with America and the Western world, which had been its stance during the Cold War, as it comes to terms with its own status as an economic superpower and the need to live with the newly awakened dragon on its doorstep, China. And the fragmentation of the West itself is completed by the phenomenon so tellingly described by Robert Kagan, namely, the drifting apart of Europe and the United States in interests, abilities and outlook—a divergence that is already diminishing everyone’s room for maneuver (look at the run-up to the 2003 war with Iraq) and will continue to do so.⁶

These emerging realities will increasingly demand more cultural engagement and real understanding—by Westerners and by others—than has been common previously. This brings us to our fourth point in respect of the urgency of a realistic self-understanding by Westerners. Cultural debate in recent decades has been characterized by what Robert Hughes has called a “sterile confrontation between the two PCs—the po-





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litically and the patriotically correct.”⁷ The “patriotism” refers to the specifically American form of the struggle; even so, in its wider context, the polarization he describes is broadly similar in shape on both sides of the Atlantic. On the one hand are those who, typically aligned with the political right, defend the Western cultural legacy in all its aspects. West is best because West is right. Economic progress and modernization stem from better cultural values. At a popular level, this has been the theme of such commentators as Pat Buchanan or the American religious right. A far more finely nuanced and intellectually substantial, but still definite, case of this sort has been made by David Landes’s book *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, in which he attempts to seek out the historical causes of both prosperity and its absence.⁸ On the other hand, and typically aligned with the political left, are those who rubbish the Western superiority complex, tear into the “cultural canon” of art and literature as being the product of a misogynistic, racist, homophobic elite, and denounce Western history as it has traditionally been understood, particularly in respect to Western contacts with other cultures, as a catalog of oppression and destruction, misrecorded by “myths” that now demand to be replaced by “counter-myths.”

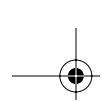


BOGUS ENGAGEMENT: “MULTICULTURALISM”

Of the two camps, the former does at least have the merit of consistency. If Western ascendancy rests on the fact that its values are rooted in a superior cultural project, then the worldwide triumph of capitalism and democracy can be expected sometime soon. In point of fact, however, this myopia is challenged by those countries—Malaysia, China and, in differing degrees, other Asian economies—that have embraced the one without the other. (In fairness, it should be said that attempts to embrace the other without the one—as in parts of the former Soviet Union—appear to be leading to the demise of the democratic experiment.)

The decline of Western populations—a topic to which we shall return—is making increasing immigration a necessity, just to keep the eco-



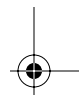
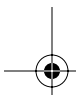


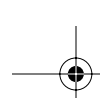
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conomic wheels turning at home. And looking abroad, the “new world (dis)order” is looking distinctly scarier than the Cold War that it has replaced: unstable Islam, the impending rise of China to the status of global colossus, the imponderable threats posed by rogue states like North Korea going nuclear. When these instabilities are enhanced by the likely drastic effects of global climate change on agriculture, economics and politics in the coming decades—effects brought about, ultimately, by industrial pollution—then Western triumphal attitudes about a superior culture and superior economics seem to be well out of order.

The latter camp, that of the politically correct brigade, is riddled with inconsistencies. Its slogan may be *multiculturalism*, but its reality is the idealization of traditional cultures by cutting them into its own image and, in the process, grotesquely distorting them. *Asian values* are OK if they are kept vague on specifics and used merely as a foil for “Western individualism” or other whipping boys of the fashionable left. But if examined too closely, they prove to be even more offensive to “correct” opinion than the Western values that have just been debunked. The battle cry of “communitarianism” is good for attacking a new supermarket development, but if applied to family ethics we soon find that we are back to homophobia, marriage and sexual chastity.

This dilemma for the left was excellently illustrated by the 1998 Lambeth Conference, which gathered together the bishops of the worldwide Anglican communion. The Conference surprised a number of commentators by its decision to uphold traditional biblical teaching in condemning homosexual practices, since it had been calculated by many that the liberal, permissive wing of the church would predominate. However, evangelicals and other traditionalists were strengthened at the conference by the augmented battalion of bishops from the growing community of the African church. As representatives of traditional cultures, these bishops had no problem with biblical injunctions on the subject of homosexuality and expressed considerable bewilderment when confronted by Westerners who did. As one of them commented, “You came





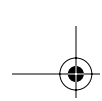
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over to our country 150 years ago and gave us the Bible. . . . Now you are telling us the Bible is not true.”

The most telling moment was when, after the motion upholding traditional teaching was passed, Jack Spong, the stridently liberal bishop of Newark, New Jersey, denounced the African bishops as “superstitious” and “uneducated.”⁹ It must have been a moment of madness; the politically correct, antiracist, multiculturalist Jack Spong would never have uttered such words, even in defense of a cause so dear to the heart of the antihomophobic Jack Spong, except under the influence of some extreme emotion. Of course, if the Africans really had been superstitious and uneducated, then only the politically correct *illuminati* would have denied the fact. For them, problems should never be addressed as problems; instead they should be sublimated into the realm of politics, thereby rendering even a frank description of the issues—let alone any possibility of resolution—impossible. In this case, however, Spong was plainly wrong on matters of fact; the African bishops were, on the whole, as educated as he. And concerning superstition, their real offense consisted of the fact that they had dared to touch one of Spong’s sacred cows. For they had failed to come to the kind of moral judgment about homosexuality that a liberal-minded, tolerant, open Westerner—as exemplified by himself—would and should have come to. In other words, the trouble with the Africans was that they were not Western enough!

The same phenomenon pervades the thinking of self-styled liberals of all kinds and makes “multiculturalism” a hollow mockery: good enough for belittling and relativizing those Western values that are really worthwhile and solid, while making absolutes of those that are trivial, egocentric and self-destructive. One example from my own experience will serve to illustrate the trend. A medium-size employer, which prided itself (with some justification) on its multiethnicity and its multicultural diversity, faced a choice of applicants for an important position. Located in a Western country, it was not surprising that the applicants were themselves Westerners. Almost all of them, anyway. One





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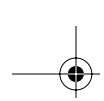
came from a definitely non-Western background. The fairly large, impeccably democratic and participative interviewing panel listened patiently to the presentations by the several would-be employees and had a *post mortem* discussion amongst themselves after each one. High hopes had been held of the non-Western applicant because the company wished to broaden the ethnic and cultural diversity of the management. In the event, he was deemed hopelessly unsuitable; his relevant technical expertise was above reproach and his English flawless, though his accent required some concentration to follow; the real difficulty was that his approach to problems was considered to be outrageously prescriptivist and cut-and-dried. Like Spong's African bishops, the fellow was simply not Western enough.

This is the irony and the emptiness of "multiculturalism." "Tolerant," "open" Western cosmopolitans can get along with anyone, anywhere, on one condition: that they be Westernized cosmopolitans like themselves. Non-Western values—or even Western values of more than a few decades ago—are simply not welcome at the table of discourse. And that discourse had better be in English; knowledge of that tongue by non-Anglo-Saxons is taken for granted, while knowledge of other languages by Anglo-Saxons themselves is suspect as élitist. It seems that all of the culture that non-Westerners are allowed under multiculturalism is their fancy dress and their war dances. In exchange they are taken as having given their tacit support to the Western left in its crusade for "communitarianism" and against "individualism"—and thus to a rear-guard action against free markets and personal responsibility after the demise of socialism and the welfare state.

SOUND PRESUPPOSITIONS, FLAWED PRESUPPOSITIONS

The main claimants to the feat of having performed a striptease of Western worldviews, then, turn out to have achieved no such thing. The mantle having fallen, we must endeavor to pick it up. I hope, however, that I am not so naive as to think that, having identified and described





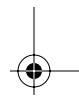
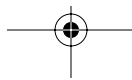
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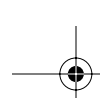
some social phenomenon, or having located its origins in time and place, we have thereby debunked it. Simply identifying some idea as a (up-till-now unexamined) “presupposition” does not demonstrate the falsity of that idea. Some foundational ideas must be presupposed, or we can neither think nor act at all.

There is some merit in insisting upon the alternative meaning of the word *presupposition*—alternative, that is, to its usual sense of “an unexamined foundational idea that, once exposed, is presumed to be false.” It can also mean one starting point among several, one which we consciously choose because of its greater explanatory power. “If we presuppose *this*,” we might say, “then the phenomena of the world around us are better or more satisfactorily explained than if we presuppose *that*.” If we bear in mind this meaning, then we can remember that something is not necessarily debunked by virtue of having been identified as “a presupposition”; whether it should be retained or junked remains an entirely separate question.

Accordingly, this book constitutes neither an attack on the Western worldview as a whole nor a defense of it. As will quickly become apparent, however, we shall find cause to approve of some aspects the more, others the less. It does, however, seem to me that fashionable Western self-loathing is fundamentally misplaced. Almost always it is directed at the fact of our wealth and power, relative to the other peoples of the earth, with the constant, quasi-Marxist (and false) assumption that the wealth must somehow inevitably be stolen from the poor, as if the economic pie were of a fixed size and economics a zero-sum game. Really, a decade and a half after the fall of communism, do we still need to go on disproving this? Our vast wealth does, indeed, impose upon us equally vast responsibilities toward those who remain in poverty. It is the real strengths of the West that created that wealth and that, tentatively and in humility, need to be proffered to those who could profit from them.

The self-loathing, however, should be redirected from the mere fact of our prosperity to the disconnection, boredom, feeble-mindedness and





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infantilism that we have allowed our wealth to let us slip into. The unprecedented comfort of our lives allows us, if we are not careful—and we have not been careful—to lose hold of the fundamental realities that underpin all human existence. We can, after all, use our wealth to cocoon ourselves from those unpleasant realities—at least for a while. In so doing, we fail to empathize with the poor majority of the earth's inhabitants who cannot escape, setting ourselves up for conflict with them. And by endorsing a determined, principled naivety, we set ourselves up for eventual fall, as reality “snaps back.”

All of this is to anticipate later chapters, however. In any case, mostly what I am trying to do is to explain. Accordingly, I offer no opinion about the rightness or wrongness of the confrontation with Iraq, or of the “war on terror,” or about the Israel-Palestine situation. Neither do I offer any prognosis about the likely future course of events in those struggles. I am hardly without opinions on these subjects, but to express them would be immediately to start an argument about symptoms; I wish to draw attention to the causes, at least on “our” (that is, the Western) side of the equation.

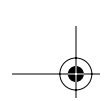


ECONOMICS, RELIGION—OR CULTURE?

Concerning the “other” side (which means, I suppose, in our present exigency, especially the Islamic world), I would venture at least this: the kind of Western political and journalistic rhetoric that attributes anti-Westernism in general and support for al Qaeda and the attacks of September 11, 2001, in particular to economics (“It's all about global poverty”) or to religion is profoundly misplaced.

To assert that economics is the root cause is wrong concerning the specific facts. Most of the terrorists of September 11 were prosperous and had benefited from Western training. Osama bin Laden's extreme wealth is well known. It is, furthermore, among the new urban middle classes of the Muslim world, not the most impoverished people in the slums or the villages, that radical Islamism thrives. Western arguments



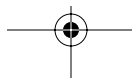


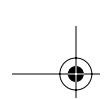
WHY THE REST HATES THE WEST

based on economic determinism stem from a discredited quasi Marxism to which our academic and chattering classes remain addicted, more than a decade after the end of communism and fully fifty years after they should have learned to know better. Marxism, of course, likes to pretend that all political, religious and cultural disputes are really economic grievances in fancy dress. Matter is all that exists, and so religion and morality are simply so much play-acting, their strictures designed to justify the economic privileges of the ruling classes. The time is long past when such reductionism might be thought to have “explained” human actions. Economics are indeed implicated in our present troubles, but only as an exacerbation of other causes. It is hardly the only—or even the main—cause of the present troubles. (Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, is in a far worse economic state than is the Middle East, but its struggles are all internal; they are not directed against the rich West.)

There simply is no neat fit between the Western middle class's desire for self-loathing (on account of their own wealth and power) and the real resentments of non-Westerners—even if the latter are understandably only too happy to pander to the former in order to exert leverage.

Neither is the “war”—if that is what this is—on terrorism simply about “religion,” even though faith is a major factor in the cocktail of conflict. Back in 1996 in Jerusalem, I had a conversation with an Israeli who insisted, in all seriousness, that Palestinian discontent was caused by Islamist radicalism. Destroy “fundamentalism,” he believed, and one would have peace between Israel and the Arabs. That the very existence of the Jewish state might be intolerable to at least some Arabs, and the actual behavior of Israel a *casus belli* even for moderate Palestinians, seemed not to have occurred to him. His myopia is mirrored, on a global scale, by Westerners everywhere. “Religion,” it is argued, is the “cause” of the conflict. The best resolution of the problem, such an analysis implies, would be the death—or at least the utter emasculation—of religion around the world. This view fails to take religion seriously, as if agnosticism were somehow “obviously” more rational and peaceful than





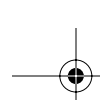
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piety—an idea that the unspeakably bloody twentieth century should have laid to rest. By their constant, mindlessly inaccurate resort to the “f-word”—fundamentalism—to describe the upsurge of religious fervor in much of the non-West, Western secularists are employing a boo-word that long ago lost its original meaning and has come to signify “more-religious-than-I-happen-to-like”—and thus to say more about the speaker than about the persons, things or phenomena described. It is one more signifier that Western self-styled “multiculturalists” are, in fact, refusing to take seriously any culture but their own. The insistence that the conflict is all about religion also ignores the rather obvious point that the religious anger is part of a response to something wider.

It is much more strongly arguable that anti-Westernism (among Muslims, at least) is due to Western foreign policies: support for Israel, the propping up of non-Islamist regimes in the Muslim world, war and sanctions against Iraq, American forces “contaminating” the holy soil of Arabia with their infidel presence. These things are difficult to disentangle. No one seriously expects any state to pursue anything other than self-interest in foreign policy. It is hard to see how Western governments could accommodate these grievances. It is likely that further demands would follow swiftly on their heels—though (since abandonment of support for the existence, at least, of Israel is practically unthinkable) we are hardly likely to find out.

Self-interested foreign policies (and foreign policies are seldom likely to be anything but self-interested) can generate short-term, and probably unavoidable, conflicts. In that sense, Blair and Bush are probably correct in their calculation that, in order to fend off a series of catastrophic attacks on Western civilian populations, military preemption is the only recourse, and the least bloody, against foes who are neither subject to the conventional logic of deterrence nor even always clearly identifiable with a state. In such calculations, the inevitable hostility that exertions of Western power provoke is a necessary price of avoiding even greater bloodshed. The determined enemies of the West may oppose



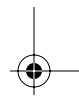


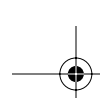
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those exertions of power (and, as in the Cold War, playing on the irresolution of sections of the Western public itself is just one more strategy in the conflict), but they cannot plausibly object that, in the same place, they would not do the same thing. To that extent, conflicts are unavoidable; the upside is that they are issue-specific and usually short-term.

My contention, however, is that the primary cause of most present conflicts in which the West is now engaged is neither religion nor foreign policy, but culture. Culture is the *radix* of which the individual conflicts over specific aspects of Western policies are often enough merely symptomatic, and which lends them an aspect of bitterness and terror. It is this “clash of civilizations” that makes the protagonists so implacable—and the resultant conflicts potentially far more deadly. Mere interests can “cut a deal”; cultures, however, cannot compromise their key characteristics without ceasing to exist. So while the reasoning of Blair’s speech to Congress was sound enough in respect of short-term realities, his claim that “ours are not Western values; they are the universal values of the human spirit” represents a dramatic ratcheting up of the rhetoric. Instead of being merely “Western distinctives,” they are now the *only* values allowable. Nothing could be a clearer statement of cultural imperialism. The claim is, in fact, false, both historically—as this book will demonstrate in some detail—and as an observation of the non-Western world in the present. Even more important, it is a recipe for war without end. For the rest of the world *knows* Blair’s words to be false as a description, since they are contradicted by every social fact around them. In consequence, they can be heard only as a statement of intent: our culture will supplant yours until it holds universal sway. As *The Times* of London echoed the following morning, ours are “fundamental values which should apply equally to all.”¹⁰

And “culture,” of course, includes religion, but also much else. Non-Westerners are becoming understandably anxious about the future of their cultural space, which they feel is being intolerably threatened by aliens—that is, by us. And to the non-West our culture appears not as





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a culture at all, but as an anticulture. Our values appear not as an alternative to traditional values but as a negation of them—as anti-values, in fact.

The truth is that we, in our hyperprosperity, may be able to live without meaning, faith or purpose, filling our threescore years and ten with a variety of entertainments—but most of the world cannot. If economics is implicated in the conflict, it is mostly in an ironic sense: only an abundance of riches such as no previous generation has known could possibly console us for the emptiness of our lives, the absence of stable families and relationships, and the lack of any overarching purpose. And even within us, the pampered babies who populate the West, something—a rather big something—keeps rebelling against the hollowness of it all. But then our next consumer goodie comes along and keeps us happy and distracted for the next five minutes. Normal people (that is, the rest of the world), however, cannot exist without real meaning, without religion anchored in something deeper than existentialism and bland niceness, without a culture rooted deep in the soil of the place where they live. Yet it is these things that globalization threatens to demolish. And we wonder that they are angry?

